

Lives That Don't Matter

GUEST COLUMN

By Ewa Thompson | [November 2020](#)

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As a slogan, “black lives matter” has borne ample fruit. It has sensitized thousands, if not millions, of Americans to the sometimes brutal police methods of apprehending criminals. Police officers must now note the skin color of possible wrongdoers before deciding on a course of action. Teachers in schools must make sure no bullying of black students ever takes place. NBC Nightly News recently launched a series of features titled *Inequality in America*. (That’s like having a series titled *Rain in America*: Where is the country in which it does not rain?) We are told to search the dark corners of our souls for our own latent racist sentiments.

If black lives are what matter now, then other lives must matter less. Or perhaps they never mattered at all. Whenever we push one group to the forefront, it is inevitable that other groups must recede to the background.

I was reminded of this recently when I perused a popular children’s book titled *The Hundred Dresses* by Eleanor Estes, published in 1944. That this book is still recommended by the National Education Association and earned a spot on its list of “Teachers’ Top 100 Books for Children” suggests that it must possess some high pedagogical merit or an arresting plot. But no, its ostensible aim appears to be to denigrate Polish Americans.

Mrs. Estes places in the center of narration one Wanda Petronski, a third-grader and the daughter of an immigrant from Poland. Estes makes sure that Mr. Petronski’s English is not only poor but coarse, reminiscent of Stanley Kowalski in Tennessee Williams’s play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Wanda always wears to school the same worn-out blue dress. Her classmates bully her mercilessly. Wanda does not respond; she just absorbs their punishment. Like the Negroes of old, she is not allowed to have her own opinions or speak out in self-defense.

Illustrator Louis Slobodnik draws Wanda as a slightly stooped and miserable-looking girl, the kind of person once called “hit me” in pop psychology. Readers familiar with European history realize that Mr. Petronski must be a war refugee, but American children do not know European history. The preface written by the author’s daughter maintains that Estes knew such a girl in her youth, and that the story takes place before World War I.

The narrator emphasizes that Wanda is “different,” that she does not belong, as if she were of another species. And, incidentally, it turns out that Wanda’s brother is the janitor’s helper, placing the family firmly on a low social rung.

When asked why she always wears the same dress, Wanda answers that she has a hundred dresses in her closet at home. Her classmates guffaw. In fact, they are so cruel that Mr. Petronski decides to move to another city and enroll his daughter in another school.

Before leaving town, Wanda participates in a drawing competition and is awarded first prize. It turns out that her “hundred dresses” are drawings rather than three-dimensional reality. But the teacher cannot give the prize to Wanda because she left no forwarding address. Her tormentors, Maddie and Peggy, come to understand that they were nasty to Wanda. Virtue is honored and the truth is out. Or is it?

The narrator’s attitude toward Wanda resembles that of whites toward blacks a few generations ago: It is patronizing and grounded in a sense of superiority. *This is a miserable soul, and we must take pity on her and torment her less.* Typical of this attitude is the narrator’s presenting the victim as passive and unable to stand up for herself. Wanda is only a recipient of the actions of others. Her feelings are of no interest; they are never articulated, even via narration. She rarely speaks; she is a marginal person, merely a stage prop in the drama of the more fully realized American schoolchildren’s lives.

The teacher eventually finds a way to contact Wanda, who writes a letter to the class. Yet even her letter contains no trace of feeling. Estes has her accept being humiliated without any reaction whatever. Indeed, Wanda even says she misses her former schoolmates! No, this is not a lesson in Christian humility but a description of how the “lower” races should behave.

At the conclusion of the book, what matters is not Wanda’s fate but the “conversion to goodness” of Maddie and Peggy.

I hardly need to add that the sense of superiority that permeates Estes’s story translates seamlessly into adult attitudes toward Americans of non-Germanic, Central European background, primarily those of Polish ethnicity. Polish Americans constitute two to three percent of the U.S. population. Virtually all of them are of Roman Catholic background. Thousands of Polish-American children must have been forced to read this book at school. How are they supposed to feel when reading a story about a Polish *schlemiel*?

Hundreds of thousands of non-Polish students have also read it, as have countless schoolteachers. Some of them were Catholics. Why hasn’t it occurred to any of them that the book reeks of contempt for a particular ethnicity? Why does the National Education Association include this racist book on its list of the top 100 books for children?

The solicitation with which the “black lives matter” slogan is repeated today obscures an enduring insensitivity to so many others whose lives likewise don’t seem to matter.