

The Whole World in Her Pen: Effie Lee Newsome, Nature and Black Joy

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“She is, as it seems to me, an unusually gifted young woman, especially in writing for children.”¹

~W.E.B. Du Bois on Effie Lee Newsome

Effie Lee Newsome (1885-1979, hereafter Newsome) was a renaissance woman—specifically, a Harlem Renaissance woman writer that most contemporary readers never knew. A veritable multi-hyphenate long before such a moniker was common, Newsome toggled between roles as a children’s poet, fiction writer, editor, illustrator, and children’s librarian. Her writing regularly appeared in popular Black publications in the early 20th century, and members of the Black literati held her in high esteem. Still, despite accolades from W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the nation’s preeminent Black activists and intellectuals, Newsome was never a household name. An elusive figure, “Effie” lacked the gravitas of Zora and Langston, the mononymous literary luminaries of her day. But she left a gold mine of a paper trail. Through a scattered archive of personal letters, a single-authored volume of poetry, and over one hundred poems published in periodicals from the NAACP’s *Crisis*, to Du Bois’s *Phylon* and the Urban League’s *Opportunity*, her work offers a glimpse of a woman with a sincere regard for little people and an abiding love of nature. Scanning her poetry and correspondence, we sense her desire to nurture Black children’s aesthetic sensibilities, and we witness her vision of the natural world, not as a site of Black oppression and trauma, but as a playground and sanctuary for Black childhood joy.

¹Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Macmillan Company, July 15, 1926. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

Born on January 19, 1885, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Effie Lee Newsome (née Mary Effie Lee) was one of five children of Mary Elizabeth (Ashe) Lee and Dr. Benjamin Franklin Lee. Her father traced his ancestry to the free Black and mixed-race farming community of Gouldstown, New Jersey. Her mother hailed from Mobile, Alabama. A descendent of “Quakers and free blacks and southern African Americans,”² young Newsome spent her childhood moving between her birth state of Texas and rural Ohio, largely due to her father’s profession. Dr. Lee served as chair of theology, homiletics, and ecclesiastical history at Wilberforce University,³ the oldest historically Black university in the nation, and he rose to the presidency in 1876. His tenure ended after eight years when he assumed the editorial helm of the *Christian Recorder*, the official publishing arm of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and a prominent vehicle for 19th century Black literary production.

The esteemed educator's professional life and his ministry as an AME bishop undoubtedly created a vibrant spiritual and intellectual environment for Newsome and her siblings. Though sources debate whether she ever earned a college degree, her father’s influence may be seen in her academic pursuits. After graduating from high school, she studied at several prominent institutions, first attending Wilberforce University (1901-1904), then Oberlin College (1904-1905), followed by the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts (1907-1908), and finally the

² Katharine Capshaw Smith, *Children’s Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 46.

³ Willam J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive and Rising* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), 925.

University of Pennsylvania (1911-1914).⁴ However, her literary and intellectual influences cannot be attributed solely to her father. Her mother, Mary Lee, also a Wilberforce graduate, likely inspired her daughter's creative interests, as she demonstrated her own "strong literary tendenc[ies]" by contributing poems and articles to the *A.M.E. Review*.⁵

Newsome's eventual career as a children's librarian at Central State University—another historically Black university located in Wilberforce—would seem to be a natural fit, given her success as a widely published children's poet. While she also wrote prose and poetry for adult readers, she distinguished herself as one of the first Black poets to write and publish poetry primarily for young children. In 1940, she released *Gladiola Garden: Poems of Outdoors and Indoors for Second Grade Readers*. The book was published by The Associated Publishers, an independent publishing company and brainchild of Dr. Carter G. Woodson, "The Father of Black History." But this collection was not Newsome's first foray into writing for young audiences. She had edited *Our Young People's Book of Verse* seventeen years earlier,⁶ and she published regularly in *Crisis*. From 1925 to 1930, she penned and curated "The Little Page," a monthly children's column featured in the magazine. Next to Jessie Redmond Faucet, whose editorial vision shaped *Crisis* and its children's spin-off *The Brownies' Book*, Newsome played a pivotal role in defining a burgeoning African American children's literary tradition.

⁴ Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey, *Double-take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 243.

⁵ Simmons, *Men of Mark*, 297.

⁶ Donnaræ MacCann, "Effie Lee Newsome: African American Pots of the 1920s," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 13, no. 2 (1988): 64.

Early correspondence between Newsome and Du Bois reveals a woman deeply committed to offering young readers bits of beauty to feed their emotional and socio-political lives. Du Bois took note and often recommended Newsome to gatekeepers in the publishing industry. In a letter to the MacMillan Company, he described Newsome as “an unusually gifted young woman, especially in writing for children.”⁷ Their working relationship would span decades, and their correspondence reveals a genuine admiration between the two, as his salutations shifted from formal address to the more personal “My dear Effie Lee.”⁸ Many of their extant letters, nestled in the Du Bois papers digitized by the University of Massachusetts Amherst, discuss the day-to-day business of publishing—looming deadlines, photo submissions and hopeful proposals for new content. Holding Du Bois in high esteem, Newsome often wrote seeking his feedback about the direction of “The Little Page.” Du Bois once replied that his “own feeling is that the Little Page is giving admirable entertainment to both grownups and children.”⁹ He had little room to complain as her column aligned with his practice of addressing both adults and children within the magazine’s pages.

⁷ Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Macmillan Company, July 15, 1926. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

⁸ Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Effie Lee Newsome, April 22, 1929. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

⁹ Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Effie Lee Newsome, April 22, 1929. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

That Newsome's editorial impulses gelled with Du Bois's publishing philosophy should come as no surprise. Her poetry had appeared in *Crisis* as early as 1917. The *Crisis Children's Number*, an annual children's issue, ultimately birthed *The Brownies' Book*, a short-lived publication which Du Bois and business manager Augustus Dill dubbed "a magazine for the children of the sun." In "The True Brownies," an essay published in *Crisis* in 1919, Du Bois outlined the mission of *The Brownies' Book*, often regarded as one of the first magazines specifically for Black children. The inaugural issue emphasized the goal of "mak[ing] colored children realize that being 'colored' is a normal, beautiful thing," and of "point[ing] out the best amusements and joys and worthwhile things of life."¹⁰ Given Newsome's long standing working relationship with Du Bois, she surely understood the cultural and political mission of the magazine. And her work did not disappoint. Her poetry floated between issuing positive representations of Black childhood and models of Black life to sharing the sublime pleasures of nature.

Gracing the pages of *Crisis* alongside Langston Hughes, Georgia Douglass Johnson, and James Weldon Johnson, Newsome's contributions seemed to counter those of her peers as she shared her musings about the natural landscape in light-hearted, rhythmic verse. Scholar Katherine Capshaw Smith, writing in *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance*, reflects on Newsome's literary output and its political connections, considering the impact of Newsome's "writing outside the sites of urban influence."¹¹ Unlike many of her contemporaries who worked

¹⁰ Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Brownies' book*. New York, N.Y.: DuBois and Dill, to 1921, 1920. Periodical. <https://www.loc.gov/item/22001351/>.

¹¹ Smith, *Children's Literature*, 3.

in New York or other urban centers during the Harlem Renaissance, Newsome found herself cradled in Black communities of the Deep South.

What brought her there? Quite simply, love. In 1920, while in her mid-thirties, she married the Reverend Henry Nesby Newsome. The couple moved to Birmingham, Alabama and resided in the West End neighborhood, where her husband pastored St. John A.M.E. Church. As Newsome's wife, she joined a ready-made family, reportedly becoming stepmother "to several children."¹² A teenager who lived in her Birmingham neighborhood and "was very friendly with the children from [Rev. Newsome's] first marriage" called the poet "a recluse...the wife of the bishop, but not a community person."¹³ Even Du Bois once described her as "a timid little mouse" (while recommending her as a guest lecturer).¹⁴

Still, Newsome was a fierce proponent of children's poetry, propelled by her singular focus on writing for Black children. It was her calling. She pitched an anonymous monthly

¹² Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Ella Clay, October 26, 1926. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

¹³ Smith, *Children's Literature*, 47.

¹⁴ Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Ella Clay, October 26, 1926. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

“vignette,”¹⁵ and she routinely sent Du Bois “a great pile of child’s rhymes”¹⁶ for his consideration. Her work as a literary citizen also ushered writings by children and teens. One letter from 1930 details her sending “a sonnet by a little girl of seventeen, Florence Mays,”¹⁷ who lived in Birmingham. Newsome developed relationships with local teachers and students, and she drew upon her professional network to see their work through to publication.

A tireless advocate for children’s literature, Newsome sometimes disclosed the struggles of balancing motherhood and a writing career—something that poet Alice Walker would explore in her 1982 essay, “A Writer Because of, Not in Spite of, Her Children.” Smith cites Newsome’s insecurities about her writing and her self-perception “as an outsider to popular creative circles,”¹⁸ and we see moments of Newsome’s self-doubt sprinkled in her correspondence with Du Bois. Her letters to the esteemed scholar—always professional, polite, and generally deferential—often apologized for late submissions. At times, she even downplayed her talent,

¹⁵ Letter from Effie Lee Newsome to W. E. B. Du Bois, January 30, 1930. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

¹⁶ Letter from Effie Lee Newsome to W. E. B. Du Bois, August 7, 1926. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

¹⁷ Letter from Effie Lee Newsome to W. E. B. Du Bois, July 21, 1930. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

¹⁸ Smith, *Children’s Literature*, 47.

describing her short story, “Blue Slab,” as “hideous.”¹⁹ One can imagine how the everyday demands of her domestic life restricted her literary output. But despite the dictates of being a preacher’s wife and a stepmother, Newsome carved out time for her craft.

Her work paid off. An avid nature lover, she skillfully translated her observations into child-centered verse on the page. Her poems display an encyclopedic knowledge of insects and birds. They vacillate between detailed images of grasshoppers, butterflies, and ladybugs. Often told in first-person, and particularly from a child’s point of view, the poems possess a sense of innocence and immediacy. Most importantly, they present an idyllic and intimate relationship between Black youth and the world’s wonders.

This connection between Black children and nature inspired Newsome’s genuine reverence for the land and defined her poetic sensibilities. Her poetry and prose invest focused attention to insects, birds, and fauna, providing what, at least on the surface, appears to be a stark contrast to the more overtly political and radical writings that appeared in *Crisis*. Yet some scholars identify the political nuances of her work. For example, Donnarae MacCann credits Newsome with using her pen to counter “anti-black literary assaults” that characterized mainstream children’s literature.²⁰ John Claborn argues that Newsome’s poetry assumes the

¹⁹ Letter from Effie Lee Newsome to W. E. B. Du Bois, June 16, 1930. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

²⁰ Donnarae MacCann, “Effie Lee Newsome: African American Poets of the 1920s,” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, 13, no. 2 (1988): 62.

conservationist discourse of the 19th century, a political and literary realm associated with white women of leisure—rarely the expected purview of Black women.²¹

But the natural world was Newsome’s playground. In her mind’s eye, Black children could wander and frolic amidst forest, streams, and creeks. In “Insect Folk,” the young speaker functions as an amateur etymologist, lifting stones to see bugs scurry as if busy with “all sorts of plans.”²² Other children observe spiders²³ or lie peacefully in grassy meadows.²⁴ Her nature writing may indeed constitute what Smith dubs “a rustic retreat from racial ideology,”²⁵ shielding young Black readers from the racial bias of the dominant white culture.

Other poems exhibit Newsome’s rhetorical finesse, positioning nature as a mirror of blackness and Black people. In “Gladiola Garden,” the title poem of her collection, the narrator speaks directly to Black children:

O little girl, O little boy,
In gardens of mixed shades, much joy,
One really has to think of you,

²¹ John Claborn, “*The Crisis*, the Politics of Nature, and the Harlem Renaissance: Effie Lee Newsome’s Eco-poetics.” *Civil Rights and the Environment in African American Literature, 1895-1941* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017): 83.

²² Effie Lee Newsome, “Insect Folk,” *Gladiola Garden* (Columbia, SC: Living Book Press, 2020), 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, “The Golden Garden Spider,” *Gladiola Garden*, 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, “In the Grass,” *Gladiola Garden*, 9.

²⁵ Smith, *Children’s Literature*, 44.

For you are many colors too²⁶

Newsome intentionally compares Black children to flowers in a garden, praising the beauty of their many hues. Her intent is clear: through the metaphorical garden, she teaches children to love their blackness, no matter their complexions.

Her most widely anthologized, and arguably most political poem, “The Bronze Legacy (To A Brown),” appeared in the *Crisis Children’s Number* in 1922. Like many of her poems that instill pride, this one builds Black children’s sense of dignity by announcing:

Tis a noble gift to be brown, all brown,

Like the strongest things that make up this earth,

Like the mountains grave and grand,

Even like the very land,

Even like the trunks of trees—

Even oaks, to be like these!

God builds His strength in bronze.²⁷

Here, blackness is replicated in the beauty of the land. Likening blackness to “the strongest things,” such as majestic mountains and sturdy tree trunks, Newsome imbues the brownness of the landscape with a divine power.²⁸ The poem ends by thanking God for brownness and proclaiming to the “Brown Boy”—and by extension all Black children—that “Brown has mighty

²⁶ Effie Lee Newsome, “Gladiola Garden,” *Gladiola Garden*, xv.

²⁷ Effie Lee Newsome, ““The Bronze Legacy (To A Brown),” *The Crisis (The Children’s Number)*, 24, no. 6 (1922): 265.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

things to do.” But more than teaching children what they can or must *do* in the world, her poetry counters racist imagery by portraying who Black children can *be*—young, joyous, and carefree.

Following her husband's death in 1937, Newsome returned to Wilberforce, Ohio where she worked as a children's librarian. In a letter dated June 22, 1940, she thanked Du Bois for his unwavering support in her “literary struggles,” and her signature noted that she was “still scribbling.”²⁹ This commitment to her craft proved fruitful, as her poetry would appear in *Golden Slippers*, a 1941 collection edited by Arna Bontemps, the Fisk University head librarian widely regarded as the “Father of African American Children's Literature.” More importantly, in the postscript of her letter to Du Bois, Newsome confided, “I am trying to bring out a book of child rhymes.”³⁰ That book would become *Gladiola Garden*, her only published collection and one of the earliest texts to celebrate Black children's place in the magical world of the outdoors.

Newsome retired from librarianship in 1963. She died on May 12, 1979, leaving a legacy as one of the most understudied figures of the Harlem Renaissance but “unquestionably the most prolific African American children's writer of the 1920's.”³¹

²⁹ Letter from Effie Newsome to W. E. B. Du Bois, June 22, 1940. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Smith, *Children's Literature*, 43.