

No Mirrors in My Nana's House

By Ysaye M. Barnwell
Harcourt Children's Books, 1998



Reviewed by
David Thaxton

Bold and striking illustrations, a lush soundtrack and poetic words of African-American wisdom envelop Barnwell's *No Mirrors In My Nana's House*. The story follows a

young girl whose definitions of beauty develop as she grows up in a house without mirrors. It takes the reader along on a short tour that turns even the dismal and the dowdy into things of wonder.

The message is simple and timeless, though a heady one for children and adults alike: beauty exists in everything, and it comes from within. By never learning to be judgmental, (or by letting go of our judgmental tendencies) we lose the capacity to hate, and open ourselves to the beauty that exists in others and in the world. A girl is intrigued by cracks in the wall, finds joy in the taste of the falling dust, hears music in a noisy, trash-filled hall, all because she never learned to cast a judgmental eye upon herself. "I never knew that my skin was too black. I never knew that my nose was too flat. I never knew that my clothes didn't fit," she says. Rather, she learns to see the beauty within herself and her world through her grandmother's loving eyes "like the rising of the sun."

The vivid illustrations of Synthia Saint James resemble cut-paper constructions with their crisp lines and smooth, even colors. As beautiful as they are to see, they also deftly carry the book's message, literally showing the reader a different way of viewing the world. Featureless faces and scenes devoid of detail invite the reader to see inner beauty through the mind's eye. Without seeing the grand-

mother's painted eyes, we are drawn to imagine their beauty and wisdom from the poetry of the text. Children (and adults) accustomed to literal imagery may likely wrestle with the illustrations, yet they provide a splendid entry point into the often under-exercised realm of the imagination.

Barnwell, a member of the women's *a capella* group, Sweet Honey in the Rock, has also woven a magnificent composition with the text. Provided on the included CD, the song is a lilting, energetic tapestry filled with the lush harmonies and rhythmic drive so typical of Sweet Honey's

work. Along with a beautifully expressive reading on the second track, the recording is one that will not soon tire.

In all, the book is a small, yet powerful nugget containing a feast for the senses and nourishment for the mind. Its message could hardly be more important; if we are to abolish racism, poverty and hatred, we must learn to recognize the true beauty in ourselves and in others.

David Thaxton is a member of The Orbit Echo Editorial Board.

Write Thaxton at:
yoteech@sbcglobal.net

