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Print

BOOKS

Green Days

Robyn Ringgold and Zaccai Free Marry Environmentalism and Children's Literature

by Petula Caesar

Solar Publishing | For more information visit www.solarpub.com.



CHRISTOPHER MYERS

Reading Is Fundamental: Robyn Ringgold's Solar Publishing specializes in eco-friendly holistic children's books.

SOME 50 CHILDREN FROM THREE city elementary schools were gathered at the downtown Baltimore Legal Aid Bureau headquarters on the corner of Gay and Lexington streets to participate in the organization's Summer Literacy Program Reading Wrap Up, coordinated by Legal Aid's Caroline Neal and Jocelyn Williams. Kids were bouncing about the room, talking, laughing, and doing what kids do when they're on a field trip. It's a challenging audience for the average author from the average publishing house, but it is all in a day's work for Robyn Ringgold and Zaccai Free of Owings Mills' Solar Publishing.

She is a smiling, well-dressed, poised young woman; Free looks almost out of place in a city with his wild locks, brightly colored clothing, and well-worn sandals. I find it striking that Ringgold and Free are African-American. Truth be told, it is rare to find blacks in book publishing, and if you do, their products are typically related to race-based social issues or fiction marketed to minorities. But as a green company, Solar Publishing is actively involved in a movement that tends to be very white.

For Ringgold, president of Solar Publishing, that is neither here nor there—it is all about the books and their messages. "We want to introduce holistic living in subtle and fun ways to children who typically don't get exposure to different aspects of holistic living, such as vegetarianism, yoga, just being out in nature," she says. "Ultimately, we want to reach out to all children, and we use diverse characters to teach subtle lessons and to help children feel more connected to nature. That's really the vision that we have for our company—to produce products to help children feel more connected to nature, which helps them feel more connected to humanity."

Ringgold and Free sit before the group of children, and Free begins by announcing that the kids are going to participate in a sing-along. He quickly teaches the words to the group, and at one part of the song Free calls on a child and that child inserts the name of something in nature that he or she would like to be: "I am a spider," "I am the sky," "I am a flower," etc. It sounds simple enough until you look at the children's faces and realize they are struggling to come up with things to be. Their little brows furrow as they try to think of natural things.

The first child called on says, "I am a tree." So does the second, and the third. The fourth one does, too. Free

encourages them to think about "the things that are out in the world" as they continue to sing. He calls on the next child who shyly and almost fearfully asks, "a bird?"

"Yes," Free says, encouraging her. The song continues, and when the next child is called on, there is a long moment of hesitation. "What do you want to be?" Free asks. The young boy seems to be gathering up his determination. "A . . . dragonfly," he finally asserts. He quickly looks around to see how his peers respond. They clap and Free smiles broadly. And as the song continues and other kids are called on, butterflies, ducks, rabbits, and clouds join the trees. The fact that Ringgold and Free are from the area (Ringgold was born in Baltimore, Free in Washington), are writers, have traveled throughout the world, and closely resemble the young faces staring up at them brings a depth to the learning experience for everyone.

Ringgold penned *My Mom Hugs Trees*, a story of an eco-friendly mother who hugs trees, talks to plants, and is kind to all animals—even bugs, much to her daughter's disgust initially—and Free wrote *Mbutu's Mangos*, the story of a Belize boy who wants to save his favorite fruits from rotting on the ground after they fall, which was inspired by a period he spent living in the jungle in "a shelter with no walls, just a roof." Both books are influenced by the authors' experiences. Both attended Florida A&M University, from which Ringgold graduated with a degree in journalism and Free received his degree in history and political science, and between the two of them they have traveled throughout Africa, South America, and India. With bright, energetic illustrations by Vidya Vasudevan, the two books offer fun reads that are subtly infused with poetry and prose. Additionally, the books gently present green concepts to children who may not be familiar with environmentalism, but the entertainment value of the stories themselves is never eclipsed.

Ringgold started Solar Publishing in January 2006, after working as an international trade magazine art director for small publishers for 10 years, over which time her environmentalist outlook evolved. "I was always into holistic living, but then the green movement took off, and I think it found us while we were finding it," she says. "I don't think that in the beginning we were necessarily saying, 'Well, we're gonna go green,' but we've gotten a lot more into that, and it's become more of the direction than when we started out. One thing that has happened is that the whole green movement has really taken off and gotten more popular. There are just so many more options in terms of products than there were even when we got started. There is even a green press initiative that some publishers are getting into. It's growing so much, and we've been growing along with it. We've really gotten into it and embraced it."

Gotten into it they have: Solar prints on post-consumer recycled paper, and through a partnership with Trees for the Future the company plants a tree for every book it sells. But is this a successful business model?

"I know we're successful because of the feedback," Ringgold says. "I hear from so many parents about how much they enjoy books. I hear from parents that they can't find books with these types of themes and diversity. If you measured it in dollars, for being in our first year, we've been pretty successful. We've grown, gotten a lot better, and we've learned even more about the publishing industry."

After the singing, Ringgold and Free read their books to the group and offer the children an autographed copy of a book of their choice. They take pictures with each child and talk to them, asking them about their aspirations and hobbies. "I always find some aspiring writers in the crowd," Ringgold says with a smile. "And I always encourage them."

"Children's books affect the whole family," Free says. "The parents buy the book for the child and end up reading it to the child, but they're reading it, too. Everybody gets an experience. In some families the older child reads to the younger child, so they're experiencing it together. With children's books, more so than any other kinds of books, the whole family, even the grandparents, gets involved in the process. They all get to learn something from what you write. You touch all of them."

Ringgold agrees. "To this day I can remember every children's book that I read when I was little," she says. "Most adults can. They have an impact on you. And that's why they are so important."