

When Julius Lester metaphorically invested in Helen Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo*, he recognized the 1899 property's good bones, and also its urgent need of an exorcism. Once he drove out colonialism, exoticism, and racial stereotyping, Lester preserved the basic structure and kid-pleasing elements—wily protagonist, serio-comic tigers, frantic tree-circling, and transformation of bad guys into butter—refurnishing it with the deft orality of a traditional storyteller, and with Jerry Pinkney's immerse visual take on the fantastical land Sam-sam-sa-mara. Reviewers, including the *Bulletin's* Betsy Hearne, lauded the renovation, but given *Sambo's* contentious legacy, it is understandable why the very existence of a re-visioning by a noted Black author and Black illustrator took up much of the critical oxygen. Now that nearly three decades have passed, and it's safe to guess that it's mainly seniors and scholars who have ever read Lester's work alongside Bannerman's original, we have an opportunity to revisit *Sam* on its own merits. And what a sturdy title it is, rollicking with playful banter (“I’m going to eat you, Sam’ ‘If you do, it’ll send your cholesterol way up”), sparkling similes (“Sam found a pair of silver shoes shining like promises that are always kept”), and the eminently chantable refrain: “Ain’t I fine!” Illustrations (with colors perhaps a tad less intense than current tastes expect) are packed with surprises hidden in plain sight—a squirrel cowering behind Sam’s leg and an aghast face formed by knotty tree bark react to Sam’s first tiger encounter; a giraffe tightly but casually packed into a fox-driven horse cart; fabric tubes attached to Sam-sam-sa-mara animal pants and skirts to preserve modesty where tail meets torso. Best of all, the boastful tigers who claim Sam’s clothing are big, muscular, and snarly, notably wilder than their fauna neighbors and sufficiently threatening to give the tale an authentic edge. Sam may be brave, but kids understand why these tigers reduce him to tears. Lester remarks in a concluding note, “Many blacks, angered

and shamed, resolved that [*Little Black Sambo*] be thrown in the garbage. For many years so had I. Yet what other story had I read at age seven and remembered for fifty years?" In 1995 he gifted readers with *Sam and the Tigers*, and it's well on its way to delivering a half century of delight. Ain't it fine!

- *Elizabeth Bush, Reviewer*