

Abstract for

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“In the Child’s Language”: Mari Evans’s “*I’m Late*” as Political Literature

In 1987¹, Mari Evans penned the essay “The Relationship of Childrearing Practices to Chaos and Change in the African-American Community”² wherein she addresses racial oppression, parenting practices, and children’s “wholeness.” The essay is comprehensive in its description of the myriad problems that families face in the U.S., but its primary goal is to address and define, in particular, the responsibility that parents and the larger African-American community have to directly address pervasive structural inequality (racism, poverty, etc.) *and* meet their children’s emotional needs. Nuanced and forthright in her approach to these problems, Evans argues, among many assertions, that “[...]the literature of an oppressed people should be a political literature [...] designed to call the people to view the nature of their oppression, to identify the oppressor, and to suggest the dynamics of destroying that oppression---of prevailing over it.” The author of several children’s books, Evans directly fulfills her essay’s mandate in “*I’m Late*”: *The Story of LaNeese and Moonlight and Alisha Who Didn’t Have Anyone of Her Own* (2006), a young adult fiction about teen pregnancy. I argue that, in both form and content, the narrative is a political children’s literary work that fulfills the essay’s mandate to directly address parenting practices and the wellbeing of children, including responses to teen pregnancy. If young adult literature is for children and adults alike, then Evans’s work meets both audiences “in the child’s language,” and calls out for “love,” as described in her essay. My paper will summarize Evans’s essay and address how “*I’m Late*” crafts settings (social contexts and subtexts) of teen pregnancy and presents realistic characterizations that demonstrate choices and outcomes of teen pregnancy decision-making and models of parenting across multiple generations. In addition, I’ll discuss how Evans’s political literature illustrates challenges and possible interventions, including a post-script summary narrative and specific questions that prompt reflection and action. Evan’s “*I’m Late*” ultimately imagines individual and collective agency and empathetic responses (activism) to structural and social inequality.

¹ Although the essay is dated 1985, Evans notes a 1986 study and she references the year 1987 within the essay, which suggests that it was written no earlier than 1987 .

² Published in *Clarity as Concept: A Poet’s Perspective* (2006), Third World Press.