No innocent fable

Should I tell my first-grader about the racist, imperialist, and misogynist legacies I detect in the book she's reading?

by Elizabeth Palmer

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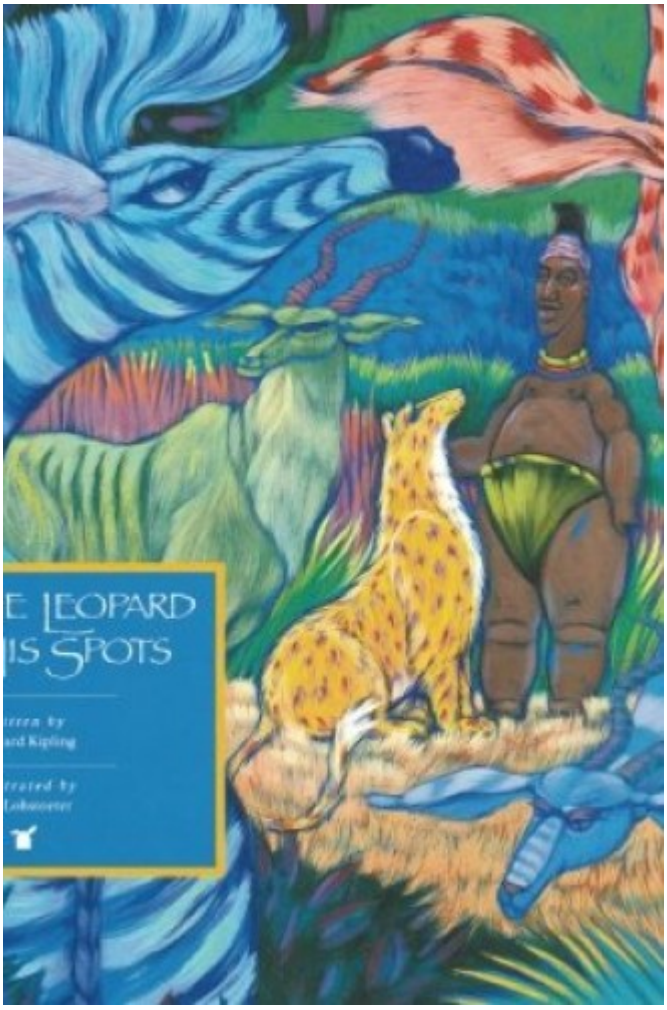
In Review



How the Leopard Got His Spots

by Rudyard Kipling, illustrated by Lori Lohstoeter
Rabbit Ears

I didn't look at the book cover as Anna opened *How the Leopard Got His Spots* and started to read to me. The words were difficult, and she stumbled over the second sentence: "'Member it wasn't the Low Veldt, or the Bush Veldt, or the Sour Veldt, but the 'sclusively bare, hot, shiny High Veldt, where there was sand and sandy-coloured rock and 'sclusively tufts of sandy-yellowish grass." But she persevered, and I helped her sound out the difficult words as she settled into the language's playful rhythm.

There are animals on the High Veldt—the Leopard, the Giraffe, the Zebra, the Eland, the Koodoo, the Bush-Buck, and the Bonte-Buck. The lone human, the Ethiopian, is smart. When the Leopard asks "where has all the game gone?" the Ethiopian rephrases the question:

> 'Can you tell me the present habitat of the aboriginal Fauna?' (That meant just the same thing, Best Beloved, but the Ethiopian always used long words. He was a grown-up.)

Anna and I laughed, and I couldn't resist peeking at the cover to see who the author was.

It was Rudyard Kipling. "Oh," I thought, and my heart sank a little. I remembered that Kipling had also written "The White Man's Burden" (which even in the most charitable construction seems to be saying that colonizers have the responsibility to work toward peace as they attempt to stamp out "sloth and heathen Folly" in the "new-caught, sullen peoples, / Half-devil and half-child" who they conquer). As Anna continued her reading, I began to wonder how the Ethiopian would fare.

After most of the animals except the Leopard camouflage themselves by acquiring stripes, splotches, or spots, the Ethiopian, advised by a wise baboon named Baviaan, changes his skin. Specifically, he changes himself from "a 'sclusively greyish-brownish-yellowish man" to one whose skin is "a nice working blackish-brownish colour, with a little purple in it, and touches of slaty-blue." He then helps the Leopard by pressing his black fingertips all over the cat's tawny skin, thus sacrificing

the blackness in his fingertips to help the Leopard become camouflaged. The Ethiopian is thrilled with his "fine new black skin" and the Leopard purrs with contentment over the beauty of his new spots. The book ends with an allusion to Jeremiah 13:23 as the narrator comments:

> Oh, now and then you will hear grown-ups say, 'Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the Leopard his spots?' I don't think even grown-ups would keep on saying such a silly thing if the Leopard and the Ethiopian hadn't done it once—do you? But they will never do it again, Best Beloved. They are quite contented as they are.

We closed the book. I said weakly, "Well, that was an interesting story. But you know it's just made up, right?"

I wondered, later, why I was so disturbed by this story (which was written over 100 years ago as part of Kipling's *Just So Stories*). I mean, there's the obvious. By providing an etiology for the color of an Ethiopian's skin, the narrative normalizes whiteness while portraying blackness as something that needs to be explained. It implies that race is something we can opt into or out of, literally changing our skin color by force of will. It implies that when a black person touches something, that thing becomes black too. Kipling's original version contains a racial slur (which, thankfully, is edited out of the 1989 edition my daughter brought home). Not to mention that the entire story is based on Jeremiah 13:23, which falls smack dab in the middle of a divine speech in which God threatens to sexually assault Israel and Judah because of their faithlessness (which, thankfully, is edited out of the Revised Common Lectionary).

But my first-grader doesn't know that Kipling was fiercely imperialist, that most of Africa (except, notably, Ethiopia) was colonized by white people, that people commonly use racial slurs against one another—and they're doing so more openly now that white supremacist nationalism is on the rise in our country, and that racism and misogyny often overlap. She doesn't know that even if race is regarded as socially constructed or fluid, a person whose skin color grants him nothing but privilege probably shouldn't make up stories about people of another race changing their skin color. Is it my responsibility to tell Anna these things? Is she old enough to learn that she belongs to a race that carries the burden of having oppressed (and continually profiting from the oppression of) people of other races?

Or should I just help her focus on the positive aspects of the book? After all, it portrays an Ethiopian man as generous, helpful, and smart. He has agency—he *chooses* to have dark skin. He loves his beautiful skin color, and it helps him navigate his world with ease and comfort. He gives the Leopard a great gift. In a society where black men's bodies are generally viewed as predatory, I want to surround Anna with as many alternative narratives as possible.

I'm not sure how to answer these questions. I do know that I'll probably keep asking them as I raise my two daughters in a world where injustice—or, let's call it what it is, *sin*—continues to implicate people of privilege as God calls us into better ways of living.