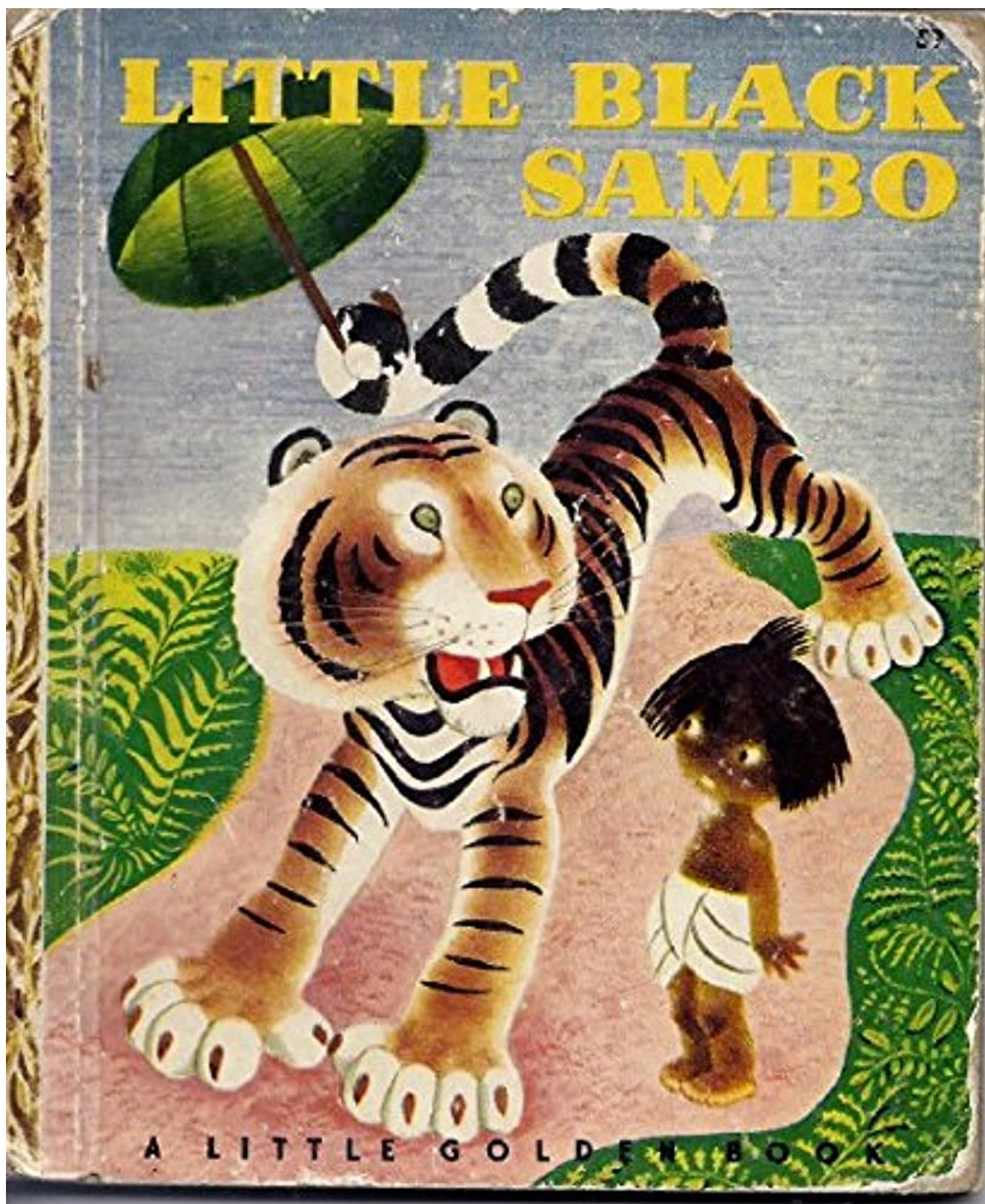


# A Capital Offense



by Theodore Dalrymple

Last week I reviewed a book published by an American academic press—it hardly matters the title or author, for in the

respect to which I wish to draw your attention they are almost all the same these days. With few exceptions, they capitalize the word *black* when it refers to a person, while keeping *white* (or *brown*) in the lower case.

This is no doubt a fashion, but it does not seem a purely spontaneous one. If there is no central enforcement, there might as well be one. The presses have been invaded by the termites of wokeness so thoroughly that there is no need of central direction.

It is unlikely in any case that the authors put up much of a fight, if any, against the imposition; most of them probably don't even see it as an imposition. I suspect, however, that any author who *did* want to resist the fashion would soon be faced by a stiff fight, which he would probably lose. His desire to be published would overcome his scruples on a matter of principle.

To me, however, the fashion has all the hallmarks of a profound but unacknowledged racism. It is as if those who insist upon this usage—the monstrous regiment of subeditors—are determined to prove just how sympathetic they are to black people, past, present, and to come. As Queen Gertrude would have put it, methinks the subeditors do protest too much.

It reveals that the subeditors of the presses, and possibly many of the authors, do not believe that blacks are just another group of human beings like any other group, but special: special in their need to be condescended to, or special in their inability to make their own way, and therefore in need of special protection, like giant pandas or the Tasmanian devil. In other words, there is a subconscious, but not very deeply subconscious, belief in their inferiority, for which nothing but such protection by, and condescension of, good, kind, and generous people (and bureaucracies) can compensate.

Now the history of group ascension in the United States (and elsewhere) suggests that the groups are capable of improving their lot, if rising in the social scale counts as improvement. Nations, too, can rise (and fall) in the pecking order, not by the benevolent aid of others, and even in the face of hostility.

It is true, of course, that blacks in America have faced many generations of ill treatment, but such prejudice as now exists against them is not legal but the kind of informal social prejudice that is common throughout history. They also benefit from prejudice in their favor, which may in the long run be more harmful to them than prejudice against.

Surely no one, whatever he thinks of the situation of blacks in America today, can seriously suppose that the capitalization of the word *black* to categorize them will improve their situation in any tangible, or even intangible, way. (My view is that, if it has any effect at all, it will have the reverse effect, by constantly drawing attention to their different moral or intellectual status from whites.)

The whole idea of protected groups—sexual, religious, or racial—seems to me a retrogression from the Enlightenment idea of treating people as equal under the law. Again, it is true that some humans *do* need protection: children, for example (increasingly from pediatric endocrinologists as well as from other predators or ill-wishers), or those who are mentally or physically handicapped. As with all human situations, there are liminal cases: Children grow, and should be guided, into autonomy. Both by granting autonomy too early, or not granting it at all, parents do harm to their children, even if they do not mean to do so; and the very fact that the process of granting autonomy should be gradual, and always requires judgment, is a sufficient explanation of why hardly anyone believes that he has been brought up *perfectly*, with no errors on the part of his parents to account for his own deficiencies.

In fact, the most resentfully inclined can ruminate on the errors their parents made all their lives long, deriving from their ruminations a certain sour comfort. I know of one case in which a man in his 60s discovered new reasons for resentment under the wise guidance of a psychotherapist. He had a sufficient sense neither of dignity nor of the absurd to keep his resentment to himself, but trumpeted it aloud as if it were an *apologia pro vita sua*.

The ideal of treating people equally irrespective of adventitious characteristics such as race is never entirely reached in practice; ideals are always, to an extent, mirages. (Deciding what is, or is not, an adventitious characteristic is itself often a matter of dispute.) But it is a better ideal than that of treating people according to race, either to keep them down as helots or put them on a pedestal as heroic victims.

Whenever I see the word *black* capitalized in academic books that praise a black person or persons, I think of Doctor Johnson's remark about women preachers: They are like a dog walking on hind legs. It is not well done, but one is surprised to find it done at all. There is an underlying, subconscious (but perhaps not entirely unconscious) quality of *despite-ness* about the praise in academic books. *Despite* being black, he or she did or achieved this or that... In other words, one wouldn't really have expected it.

I am also reminded of a children's book in my possession dating, I think, from about 1930. Its title was *Although He Was Black*. It was about a little black boy, naturally called Sambo, whom a colonial official brought back to England to be a servant-companion of his son. One day Sambo saves the life of the white boy, and the book ends with the memorable sentence "Although he was black, he was the whitest little fellow I ever knew."

Whatever one might think of this, it strikes me as having more

genuine feeling than the typographical amendments now found in academic books. Besides, it would be wrong to criticize the book: It was written by a Woman, you see.

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