



# Elder Wisdom and Cultural Preservation in Dragons in a Bag

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## Abstract

*In many Black communities, elders have served as keepers of cultural knowledge, passing down traditions, survival strategies, and stories through oral storytelling when written records were destroyed or denied. However, in children's literature, older characters are often sidelined or presented as obstacles to young protagonists' independence, reflecting Western values that privilege youth autonomy over intergenerational connection. This pattern has real consequences for young readers' understanding of cultural transmission. This is especially true in communities where oral traditions are essential for preserving knowledge that formal education has historically erased or devalued. While recent scholarship on Afrofuturist children's literature has examined language use and world-building, less attention has been paid to how these texts position elder characters as active agents of cultural sustainability. This study examines Zetta Elliott's *Dragons in a Bag* (2018) to ask how elder characters function as cultural sustainers in contemporary Afrofuturist children's literature, and what does this reveal about the role of intergenerational dialogue in preserving endangered cultural practises? By closely reading the novel, I focus on the relationship between the protagonist Jax and Ma, a Black witch who teaches him about magic based on African diaspora traditions. This research examines how Elliott builds the narrative around passing knowledge from elder to child. The analysis reveals that Ma simply does not give Jax magical abilities; rather, she actively teaches him the history, responsibility, and cultural context behind that power. This intergenerational teaching model challenges the common fantasy theme where young heroes gain power without help or understanding. The study suggests that by highlighting the importance of elder wisdom, young Black characters can better understand and use their power. Elliott shows how oral storytelling and conversations between generations can keep cultural knowledge alive, which written systems have not been able to do. This research adds to the discussions about cultural sustainability and multilingual education. It shows that children's literature can acknowledge oral traditions as real knowledge systems. This gives young readers the chance to see how cultural preservation happens through everyday conversations between generations rather than only through formal institutions.*

**Keywords:** Afrofuturism, Children's Literature, Cultural Sustainability, Intergenerational Connections



## **The Problem with Missing Elders in Children's Books**

Walk into any bookstore and pick up popular fantasy novels for children. You will notice a pattern that Harry Potter's parents are dead. Katniss Everdeen's father died in a mining accident, and her mother barely functions. Percy Jackson's divine father is absent. In story after story, young heroes face their challenges essentially alone, without meaningful guidance from older generations. This narrative pattern reflects certain Western cultural values about independence and self-reliance, but it creates problems when it becomes the only model available to young readers. For Black children specifically, this pattern contradicts their own cultural heritage. In African American communities, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and community elders have historically played essential roles as teachers and keepers of cultural memory. During slavery, when reading and writing were forbidden, knowledge had to pass orally from person to person. After emancipation, many Black families still faced barriers to formal education, making elder teaching even more critical. Older family members taught children not just practical skills but also histories that school textbooks ignored, stories about African heritage that slavery tried to destroy, and strategies for surviving racism. This intergenerational transmission was not optional but necessary for cultural survival. When Black children encounter only stories where elders are absent or obstacles to overcome, they receive an implicit message that the very connections that sustained their ancestors are things to outgrow. This matters because children's literature shapes how young readers understand themselves and their possibilities. As Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns, when one type of story dominates, it creates "the danger of a single story" that defines entire communities by narrow experiences (Adichie).

### **Ma as Teacher**

Dragons in a Bag introduces readers to Jaxon, a Black boy in Brooklyn whose mother sends him to spend a day with Ma, an elderly woman she knows from the neighbourhood. Jaxon expects boredom, but

Ma turns out to be a witch who needs help transporting baby dragons to a magical realm. What follows is an adventure, but more importantly, it becomes an education. Elliott's portrayal of Ma avoids two common stereotypes about elderly characters. Ma is neither the all-knowing wise woman with every answer nor the helpless old person who needs rescuing. Instead, she possesses deep knowledge and real power while also having limitations that come with age. She can perform magic Jaxon cannot imagine, but her ageing body struggles with certain physical tasks. This realistic portrayal teaches young readers that needing help does not diminish worth, and having wisdom does not mean having no vulnerabilities. The author explains her approach in personal communication,

I was very close to my grandparents, and so I often include elders in my stories. It was hard to trust my parents, and they often didn't have time to listen closely to me; my grandparents had more time and took an active interest in my life and my development as a writer (Elliott, personal communication, 2026).

This personal experience shapes how Elliott writes elder-child relationships. Ma gives Jaxon the attention and guidance he needs, especially important since his father has died and his mother struggles with stress about magic. Ma's teaching style combines direct instruction, storytelling, and hands-on experience. When Jaxon asks how magic works, Ma does not just perform impressive tricks. She explains the history behind magical practices, connecting them to African knowledge systems that survived slavery. She tells Jaxon that her kind of magic is old magic from the old world, brought over by enslaved Africans in their minds since they could bring nothing else (Elliott 18). This moment accomplishes several things simultaneously. It teaches historical facts about enslaved Africans, retaining knowledge despite being stripped of possessions. It presents African spiritual traditions as valuable knowledge worthy of respect. Most importantly, it shows Ma actively sharing this history, making Jaxon part of a long chain of transmission. Throughout the book, Ma's teaching



follows patterns common in African and African American cultural traditions. She tells stories, offers observations, and creates situations where Jaxon must figure things out himself while she provides guidance. This might look informal compared to classroom teaching, but it represents a sophisticated approach that has sustained knowledge for generations in communities where formal schooling was unavailable or hostile.

### **Dragons as Heritage**

The dragons function as symbols of ancestral cultural knowledge. They are powerful, valuable, and potentially dangerous if mishandled, but ultimately liberating when properly understood and cared for. Ma's task is not just transporting dragons but protecting them during a vulnerable growth stage. When she asks Jaxon to help, she teaches him about responsibility and care. This is not a story where an elder simply hands power to a young person and walks away. Ma stays involved, explaining what the dragons need, why certain steps matter, and what could go wrong. When Jaxon makes inevitable mistakes, Ma does not punish him harshly but helps him understand consequences and find solutions. Her teaching acknowledges that learning involves mistakes, which become opportunities for growth rather than evidence of failure. Elliott explains her intentions regarding power and inheritance,

I definitely wanted to counter the trend that has a child protagonist who 'inherits' their power from adults. I used that trope in *The Deep* (2013) but don't know if I'd use it now. I'm not a monarchist and definitely don't believe the accident of birth should entitle anyone to power and/or privilege. Magic is for everyone! (Elliott, personal communication, 2026).

This philosophy shapes how Ma teaches Jaxon. He does not inherit special abilities because of who his parents were. Instead, he gains access to magic through learning, effort, and connection to the community. The dragon-care plot mirrors the real work of cultural preservation. Just as Jaxon must learn to feed, protect, and transport dragons carefully, young Black people must learn to appreciate and care for their cultural heritage. This means understanding

not just the beautiful or powerful parts of that heritage but also its vulnerabilities. The dragons are small and defenceless when Jaxon meets them, just as cultural traditions can be fragile when facing forces that want to destroy or dismiss them. Ma teaches that heritage requires active care, attention, and sometimes courage.

### **The Power of Oral Tradition**

One of Ma's primary teaching methods is storytelling. Throughout *Dragons in a Bag*, she shares stories about her own past, other witches she has known, and magical events that happened before Jaxon was born. These stories entertain, but they also transmit crucial information about how magic works, what dangers exist, and why certain practices matter. Oral storytelling has been central to African and African American culture for centuries. During slavery, when reading and writing were forbidden, oral stories became the primary way to preserve history, teach lessons, and maintain cultural identity. Griots in West African societies held the crucial role of remembering and reciting histories, genealogies, and important knowledge. In African American communities after slavery, similar practices continued through church testimonies, family stories shared across generations, and community gatherings where elders spoke about the past. Elliott reflects on how magic serves this teaching function,

Magic then becomes a way to make the past present—time travel and/or ghosts remind us that the past isn't that distant and can still be relevant in the contemporary moment. Many Black people think the past only holds pain—enslavement, segregation, imperialism and its legacies. But there's courage and innovation and resistance, too (Elliott, personal communication, 2026).

Ma's stories carry this dual awareness. She does not hide painful histories, but she also emphasises resistance, creativity, and strength alongside suffering. The storytelling in *Dragons in a Bag* is not a one-way transmission. Jaxon asks questions, offers observations, and sometimes disagrees with Ma's interpretations. This back-and-forth dialogue is essential to living oral traditions. Unlike written texts



that stay fixed on the page, oral stories change slightly each time they are told, adapting to new audiences and contexts while preserving core truths. The conversations between Ma and Jaxon model this dynamic process, showing readers that cultural transmission involves dialogue rather than passive reception. Elliott emphasises her pedagogical approach,

My job is to present the past in a way that doesn't terrify, shame, or bore young readers, and magic can serve as a tool/shield/compass to safely navigate that tricky terrain (Elliott, personal communication, 2026).

Ma accomplishes exactly this through her storytelling, making history engaging and empowering rather than overwhelming.

### **Community-Based Knowledge**

Another important aspect of Elliott's approach is that Ma does not present herself as the only source of knowledge. Throughout the book, she mentions other witches, magical beings, and community members who all contribute to keeping magic alive. She tells Jaxon that no single witch knows everything, and different witches specialise in different areas. This community-based approach contrasts sharply with the "chosen one" narrative common in children's fantasy. In many popular fantasy books, one special child has unique abilities that make them the key to saving the world. This creates exciting stories but promotes an individualistic worldview where progress depends on extraordinary individuals rather than collective effort. *Dragons in a Bag* offers a different model. Jaxon is not uniquely special or prophesied to do great things. He is an ordinary kid who happens to be in the right place to help. Elliott explains this choice, Jax is an ordinary kid, and I think that makes him relatable. He's smart, resourceful, and humble, yet he often gets overlooked; he also has doubts and makes mistakes. He doesn't automatically know how to wield power and so turns to his community for help (Elliott, personal communication, 2026).

This ordinariness matters because it tells readers that they, too, can access cultural knowledge and

power, not through special birthright but through learning and community connection.

Ma models community-based knowledge by not pretending to have all the answers. When Jaxon asks about something she does not know, she says so honestly and sometimes suggests they find someone who does know. This teaches that wisdom includes knowing your limits and valuing others' expertise. It also shows that seeking help is not a weakness but a normal part of how communities function. This communal approach reflects how cultural knowledge actually survives in real communities. No single person carries everything. Instead, different people contribute different pieces that one person knows traditional recipes, another knows old songs, and someone else remembers family histories. By working together and sharing what they know, communities keep heritage alive even when individual members pass away or forget certain things.

### **Reclaiming Dismissed Knowledge**

Throughout *Dragons in a Bag*, Elliott makes clear that what Ma teaches Jaxon is knowledge that formal institutions have tried to erase or dismiss. When Ma talks about African magic and spiritual practices, she explains that these were called "superstition" by people who wanted to make them seem worthless. Calling knowledge systems "superstition" is itself a political act, a way of saying some ways of understanding the world count as real knowledge while others do not. This connects to real historical patterns. European colonisers and American enslavers often dismissed African religions, medicines, and cultural practices as primitive or backward. This dismissal served a purpose that if Africans had nothing valuable to teach, then destroying their cultures seemed less harmful, and exploiting them seemed easier to justify. Even after slavery ended, American schools taught Black children histories that portrayed Africa as lacking civilisation and Black people as having no cultural heritage worth preserving. Elliott addresses this directly,



Afrofuturism recognises that time is cyclical, so the past matters because Black people tend to live through the same cycle of oppression/resistance/liberation (if they live long enough) (Elliott, personal communication, 2026).

Ma's teaching acknowledges this cycle while emphasising the resistance and liberation parts, not just the oppression. When Jaxon learns that Ma's magic comes from African traditions, he does not learn to feel ashamed. He learns curiosity and respect. The book shows that what was dismissed as superstition is actually a functioning knowledge system with its own logic and real effects. Elliott notes,

Magic is power, and so is knowledge; I don't think it empowers kids to hide the truth about our shared history (Elliott, personal communication, 2026).

This matters for contemporary conversations about cultural sustainability and endangered languages. Around the world, indigenous and minority communities face pressure to abandon their languages, spiritual practices, and cultural traditions in favour of dominant cultures. Often, this pressure comes through education systems that either ignore minority cultures or actively teach children to see them as inferior. When children read books that validate rather than dismiss their heritage, it supports cultural survival.

### **Mirrors in Fantasy**

The significance of representation in children's literature cannot be overstated. For decades, Black children rarely saw themselves in fantasy and science fiction. When they did appear, they often played marginal roles or served as tokens. This exclusion sent a message that Black people had no place in imagined futures or magical worlds. Elliott speaks directly to this issue, Very! I love getting emails from parents and educators letting me know that their Black child/student saw the cover of *Dragons in a Bag* as a mirror. That moment of recognition led to them picking up the book and not wanting to put it down, partly because I'm depicting a world they understand (Elliott, personal communication, 2026).

This "mirror" moment matters because it tells Black children that magic and adventure belong to them, too. The author continues,

I want Black children to understand that they have the right to define themselves, though others may try to put them in a box. My fantasy fiction isn't really offering an escape from the world they know—it's showing a version of that world where kids can contribute to a more just, inclusive community (Elliott, personal communication, 2026).

This approach differs from fantasy as pure escapism. Instead, Elliott uses fantasy to help children envision possibilities for their real world. By centring Black characters and validating Black cultural traditions through fantasy, Elliott contributes to what scholar Rudine Sims Bishop called providing "mirrors" for Black children in literature (Bishop 3). When children see themselves reflected in books, it validates their existence and experiences. When those reflections show them as powerful, magical, and central to stories, it expands their sense of possibility. Elliott faced resistance from traditional publishing when trying to create these mirrors. Studies show that as recently as 2015, 79% of publishing staff were white, with decision-makers being even less diverse (Lee & Low Books). These gatekeepers often assumed they knew what books would sell and rejected manuscripts with Black protagonists in speculative genres. Elliott has increasingly turned to independent publishing to maintain creative control and ensure Black children have access to fantasy stories that centre them.

### **How Children's Literature Sustains Culture**

The analysis of *Dragons in a Bag* reveals multiple ways children's literature can function as a vehicle for cultural sustainability. First, books like Elliott's model intergenerational knowledge transmission, showing young readers what it looks like when elders teach, and young people learn. Children who read these books see examples of respectful, productive relationships between generations working together. Second, these books validate oral traditions as legitimate knowledge systems. In a culture that often privileges written over oral



communication and scientific over spiritual ways of knowing, *Dragons in a Bag* presents oral storytelling and spiritual practices as sources of real power and wisdom. This validation matters especially for children from communities where oral traditions remain important but face dismissal by mainstream institutions. Third, books like this provide frameworks for understanding how cultural preservation happens through everyday conversations and relationships rather than only through formal institutions like museums or schools. Jaxon does not learn about his heritage by visiting a museum or taking a class. He learns by spending time with Ma, listening to her stories, asking questions, and helping with tasks. This shows readers that cultural transmission can happen in ordinary moments of connection between generations. Elliott emphasises this point,

Older Black people use their personal experiences and understanding of history to provide a different perspective, and that shared wisdom educates and empowers children (Elliott, personal communication, 2026).

This wisdom transfer happens not through formal curriculum but through relationship and dialogue. Fourth, these narratives help young readers see heritage as something dynamic and living rather than frozen in the past. Ma's magic is not an artefact from history belonging in a museum. It is a living practice that adapts to contemporary Brooklyn while maintaining connections to African roots. This models how cultures actually survive not by staying the same across generations, but by finding ways to maintain core values and practices while adapting to new circumstances.

### Conclusion

Afrofuturist children's literature like *Dragons in a Bag* demonstrates that cultural sustainability depends

on maintaining living connections between generations through conversation and storytelling, not just preserving artefacts or written records. Elliott shows it is possible to teach children about difficult histories without creating hopelessness, explaining, "We can't change the past, but we can learn how to design a better future" (Elliott, personal communication, 2026). By centring elder wisdom as necessary rather than optional, Elliott challenges the orphan-hero fantasy model and suggests that strength comes from knowing who came before you. The magic in *Dragons in a Bag* may be fictional, but the cultural work it performs is real, showing a Black elder teaching a Black child about their shared heritage in ways that empower rather than burden, helping ensure future generations will see their heritage as a source of knowledge, power, and pride.

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