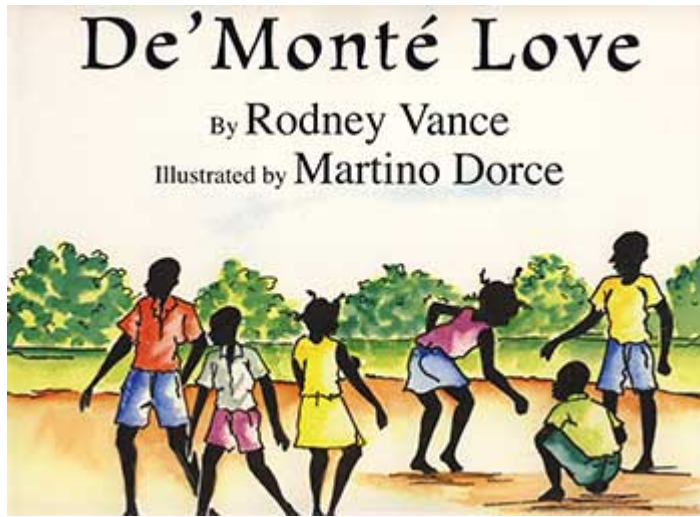


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Love Story

Hurricane Katrina's pint-size hero and freshly minted literary figure, De'Monté Love, rides into town as an honored guest of Pasadena's Black History Month Parade & Festival.

By Brenda Rees

***In the jazzy, spicy city of New Orleans | In a building colored mango tangerine | Lived a mommy and a daddy and a brother | And a boy whose name was De'Monté Love
—Opening pages of "De'Monté Love" by Rodney Vance***

Pasadena writer Rodney Vance is about to come face to face with his muse: 8-year-old De'Monté Love. The subject of his first children's book is set to arrive in town as a star of the 26th annual Black History Month Parade & Festival on Feb. 16. Love won pride of place in a stranger's literary career after becoming a rare bright spot in the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina. While government bureaucrats flailed about in the face of the disaster, one small child instinctively knew how to take care of others in the aftermath of the 2005 storm – and quietly, he did.

Vance was astounded to hear the story of the then-6-year-old boy, who shepherded his five younger relatives and friends (including his 5-month-old brother, Da'Roneal) after the children were separated from their parents. The television writer and playwright penned the book "De'Monté Love" (Visikid; Aug. 2007) in less than three weeks. "Here was a story that was simple but had a big impact," says Vance, who only later spoke to the boy and his mother, Catrina Williams, by phone. "I'm really excited to meet him in person."

Love was touted as a hero after reporters learned how he, along with family and friends, spent three days stranded on the roof of a home in uptown New Orleans. A pilot finally came to the rescue, but the helicopter had room for only the children. Williams instructed her son to care for his brother, cousins and friends – all of whom were less than 3 years old. Just before taking off for Baton Rouge, the pilot promised to come right back for the adults, but he never returned. A different pilot picked up the adults, but instead of flying them to Baton Rouge, he landed at the Louis Armstrong New Orleans International airport. From there, Williams and her friends flew to San Antonio, Texas, where she began a frantic search for the children.

"We were devastated," she says in a telephone interview from San Antonio, where the family now lives. "I honestly didn't know if I was ever going to see my kids again."

While his mother made myriad phone calls and waded through red tape, Love guarded over his little brood for four days in a crowded shelter, where he encouraged the children to keep up their spirits by holding hands. Social workers and nurses there quickly discovered the little boy taking on a very adult role, so they helped Love tend to and play with his charges. In an interview with National Public Radio, Love was asked if he'd changed any diapers during the four-day

ordeal. “No!” he quickly responded; he later explained that when the kids were hungry, “I just asked the people who were taking care of us” for food.

Eventually, Williams saw her children’s pictures on a web site set up by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. Representatives from the Air Charity Network (formerly Angel Flight America) escorted the children by plane to San Antonio, where the family embraced in a tearful reunion. (The nonprofit Air Charity Network provides free air transportation for individuals experiencing a health crisis or disaster.)

“We were all so happy, I can’t tell you,” Williams recalls. “I was so glad he had his right mind to keep them all together. He made me proud.”

Love’s story touched people disturbed by post-Katrina reports of looting, brutality and makeshift shelters erected near filth. The little boy’s shining and heroic actions stood in sharp contrast to the detritus of the storm’s mismanagement. Love’s example inspired Vance, who asked his next-door neighbor, Haitian-born artist Martino Dorce, if he would illustrate the book. Dorce says fans of his colorful style had approached him numerous times to illustrate children’s books, but he always said no. Love’s tale was different.

“I love this story,” he says. “That’s the reason I [did] it. It touched me.” With muted colors and designs suggesting exotic yet familiar locales, Dorce’s work meshes a childlike simplicity with the artist’s deft touch. His agreement to collaborate on the project grabbed the attention of publisher Leon Goss of Sylmar-based Visikid Books. Sealing the deal, Goss says, was the “poetry of the story. It was an immediate yes.”

But not an immediate rush to the presses; it turned out to be more difficult to obtain approval from the hero and his family than the publisher expected. “It took eight months to find them,” Goss says, reeling off names of agencies, organizations and even reporters who helped them finally locate the family in San Antonio.

Then, when Goss reached Williams by phone, she was initially skeptical about the project. “They just didn’t want anyone taking advantage of them,” Goss says. “She was understandably protective of her son and their family.”

Williams’ doubts were dashed by a proof of the book. “We had heard lots of promises, so I wasn’t expecting much,” Williams says. “But it was a nice book. For a guy who didn’t know us, [Vance] sure was writing about us like he did.”

Critics have been impressed too. The Buffalo News praised the book’s “lilting rhymes” and “Caribbean-flavored paintings [which offer] dramatic visions of Katrina’s devastation.” Amazon.com’s reviewer said it is “sure to tug at your heartstrings, while it teaches the valuable lessons of perseverance and courage...the book is a treasure.”

Goss has commissioned Vance and Dorce to create a series of inspirational children’s books based on true stories, of which “DéMonté Love” is the first. The series is titled Heroes All Around. After all, notes Goss, we meet heroes every day. “We just have to keep our eyes open at all times.”

Perhaps no one knows that more than Williams. Her son may be the one who garnered accolades — not the least of which was Time Magazine’s Local Hero of the Year for 2005 — but Williams believes she has won the best prize of all.

“I call De’Monté my super hero,” she says, “because every day he does lots of things that are positive. To be here with him and share with him every day is such a gift. He’s my gift.”

The 26th Annual Black History Parade & Festival takes place Saturday, Feb. 16. Both the parade and festival are free. The parade runs from 10 a.m. to noon, led by celebrity co-grand marshals and actors Bookeem Woodbine and Bill Cobbs; it begins at Charles White Park on Ventura Boulevard and Fair Oaks Avenue in Altadena and ends at Robinson Park, 1081 N. Fair Oaks Ave., Pasadena. From noon to 4 p.m., the festival at Robinson Park offers entertainment, food and a display of black inventions.

For more information about both events, call (626) 744-7300.

Vroman’s Bookstore hosts a booksigning by Rodney Vance and Martino Dorce on Saturday, Feb. 9, from noon to 1 p.m. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to the Love family and to the Texas-based Air Charity

Network. The bookstore is located at 695 E. Colorado Blvd., Pasadena. For more information, call (626) 449-5320.

To learn more about Heroes All Around, visit www.visikidbooks.com.