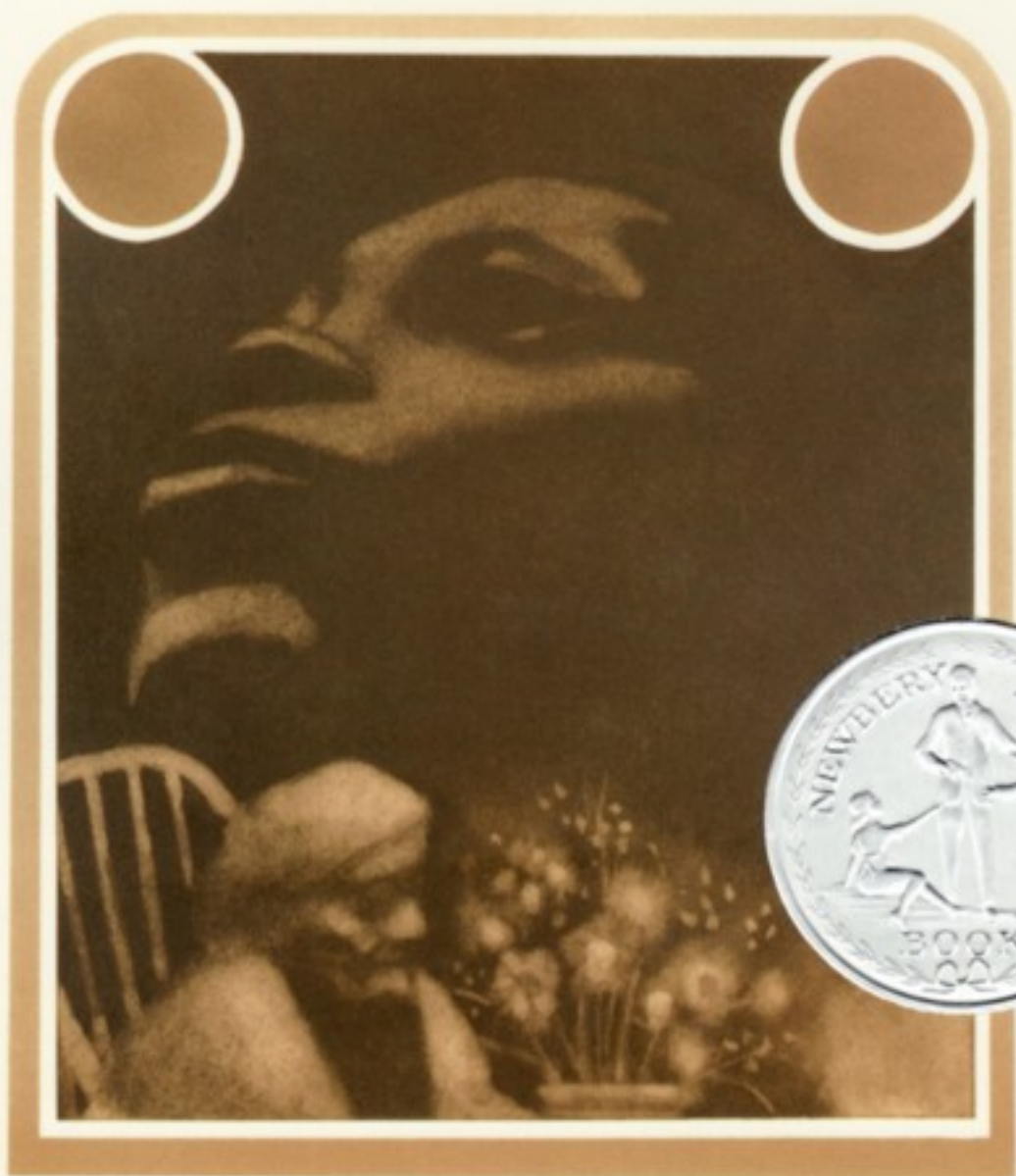


Sharon Bell Mathis

THE HUNDRED PENNY BOX



Illustrated by Leo & Diane Dillon



Michael sat down on the bed that used to be his and watched his great-great-aunt, Aunt Dew, rocking in the rocking chair.

He wanted to play with the hundred penny box—especially since it was raining outside—but Aunt Dew was singing that long song again. Sometimes when she sang it she would forget who he was for a whole day.

Then she would call him John.

John was his father's name. Then his mother would say, "He's Mike, Aunt Dew. His name is Michael. John's name is John. His name is Michael." But if his father was home, Aunt Dew would just say "Where's my boy?" Then it was hard to tell whether she meant him or his father. And he would have to wait until she said something more before he knew which one she meant.



Aunt Dew didn't call his mother any name at all.

Michael had heard his father and mother talking in bed late one night. It was soon after they had come from going to Atlanta to bring back Aunt Dew. "She won't even look at me—won't call my name, nothing," his mother had said, and Michael could tell she had been crying. "She doesn't like me. I know it. I can tell. I do everything I can to make her comfortable—" His mother was crying hard. "I rode half the way across this city—all the way to Mama Dee's—to get some home-made ice cream, some decent ice cream. Mama Dee said, 'The ice cream be melted fore you get home.' So I took a cab back and made her lunch and gave her the ice cream. I sat down at the table and tried to drink my coffee—I mean, I wanted to talk to her, say something. But she sat there and ate that ice cream and looked straight ahead at the wall and never said nothing to me. She talks to Mike and if I come around she even stops talking sometime." His mother didn't say anything for a while and then he heard her say, "I care about her. But she's making me miserable in my own house."

Michael heard his father say the same thing he always said about Aunt Dew. "She's a one-hundred-
10 year-old lady, baby." Sometimes his father would add,

"And when I didn't have nobody, she was there. Look here—after Big John and Junie drowned, she gave me a home. I didn't have one. I didn't have nothing. No mother, no father, no nobody. Nobody but her. I've loved her all my life. Like I love you. And that tough beautiful boy we made—standing right outside the door and listening for all he's worth—and he's supposed to be in his room sleep."

Michael remembered he had run back to his room and gotten back into bed and gotten up again and tip-toed over to the bedroom door to close it a little and shut off some of the light shining from the bathroom onto Aunt Dew's face. Then he looked at Aunt Dew and wished she'd wake up and talk to him like she did when she felt like talking and telling him all kinds of stories about people.

"Hold tight, Ruth," he had heard his father say that night. "She knows we want her. She knows it. And baby, baby—sweet woman, you doing fine. Everything you doing is right." Then Michael could hear the covers moving where his mother and father were and he knew his father was putting his arms around his mother because sometimes he saw them still asleep in the morning and that's the way they looked.



Michael loves to spend time with his great-great-aunt Dew and her hundred penny box. The box contains a penny for each year of her life, and for each of them, Aunt Dew has a story to tell. Michael's mother wants to replace the battered old penny box, but Michael knows that the box itself is as important to Aunt Dew as the cherished memories it holds.