

# RISE *A CHILDREN'S LITERACY JOURNAL*

READING INSPIRES SUCCESS IN EDUCATION

**SPRING/SUMMER 2021**



## **FEATURED ARTICLE:**

**“There’s a lesson to be learned”  
Southern Literature for Children  
Lessons of the Past, the Present and for the Future**

*By Theresa “Tree” Martus*



***Plus Many More Articles and Reviews!***

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We take great pleasure in bringing you the Spring/Summer 2021 issue of *RISE: A Children's Literacy Journal*. *RISE* is intended for parents, teachers, librarians and all others who share our belief that reading inspires success in education. All of us involved in the production of this journal believe that literacy and literature go hand in hand, and this belief is reflected in our celebration of excellent children's literature. In the pages of *RISE*, you will find articles and reviews about excellent children's books.

This issue focuses on children's books that deal with the American South. In the cover story, Tree Martus provides an overview of children's literature set in the South. She also includes an annotated bibliography of children's books that relate to this topic. Other contributors provide articles about particular children's books set in the South. Also included in this issue is an article by Jan Susina about Norton Juster and his novel *The Phantom Tollbooth*. We invite you to peruse our journal and share it with your friends. We hope that the articles and book reviews will introduce new books to you and the children in your life.

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## Summer 2021

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# “There’s a lesson to be learned”

## Southern Literature for Children

### Lessons of the Past, the Present and for the Future

By Theresa “Tree” Martus

“You see that fig tree over yonder, Cassie? Them other trees all around . . . that oak and walnut, they’re a lot bigger and they take up more room and give so much shade they almost overshadow that little ole fig. But that fig tree’s got roots that run deep, and it belongs in that yard as much as that oak and walnut. It keeps on blooming, bearing good fruit year after year, knowing all the time it’ll never get as big as them other trees. Just keeps on growing and doing what it gotta do. It don’t give up. It give up, it’ll die. There’s a lesson to be learned from that little tree, Cassie girl, ‘cause we’re like it. We keep doing what we gotta, and we don’t give up. We can’t.” (*Taylor, Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry, 205-206*)



When I was tasked with writing this article my first thought was, “I love this. Southern Literature. I read Southern Literature often and enjoy the genre.” And so I fell down the tunnel, headed for my own trip into a southern Wonderland... but of adult Southern Literature. Harper Lee, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, Tennessee Williams, Sue Monk Kidd, Fannie Flagg, Anne Rivers Siddons... and it was at this point that I stopped, sat back, and said, “Wait? For children?” What then began was a search to discover what the definition of Southern Literature is as, by creating a framework, perhaps then I could look through the looking glass at Children’s Literature to find the southern gems hidden therein. Sadly, my search was none too fruitful as what I came to discover is that what we know as Southern Literature is comprised of an array of components which establish it as a genre, but it does not have a fixed form as there rages debates regarding which states even comprise the South. I then realized that books I cherish like *Tuck Everlasting* by Natalie Babbitt and *A Long Way from Chicago* by Richard Peck, exist in areas both wholly fictional and intangible, or in States not strictly thought of as the “South,” whatever

that may be.

So, what is Southern Literature? According to the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* ([www.global.oup.com](http://www.global.oup.com)), Contemporary Southern Literature is comprised of three trends: “the narrative of racial memory,” “the narrative of the southern environment,” and lastly, “the narrative of the (un) changing south.” In using these three points as a framework, I began peering at Children’s Literature through a new glass... that of looking at the past and seeing how it has shaped the present and is shaping the future of children’s literature. Yes, there are books set in the south. Yes, there are books written by Southern Authors. But, what do these books have in common and

what testament to the American South do they hold that paints a picture of what the South once was and what it is coming to mean?

I am young enough to have been introduced to Southern Literature through the Disney adaptation the *Trickster Tales* collected and rewritten by Joel Chandler Harris. Harris, a native of Eatonton, Georgia, spent time working on the Turnwold Plantation where he heard these *Trickster Tales* being told by the slaves. He collected these tales and published them in book form as *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings in 1880*. I came to know the *Trickster Tales* of Brer Rabbit through *Song of the South* released by Disney Studios in 1946. Growing up in the 1980’s, I can remember watching Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear and singing along to “Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah.” From its release, controversy has swirled around *Song of the South* and its portrayal of what is often viewed as stereotypical characters in an idealized setting. But, what *Song of the South* did was introduce many a generation of children like myself to an aspect of southern history with roots in Africa and other countries as behind the

controversy are Trickster Tales which stem from all parts of the world.

The Brer Tales are significant to the history of the American South as they showed how, through wits and guile, one could escape from an adversary. But, they are not the only Tales that stem from and provide a sense of the historical past of the Southern Region. Native Americans shared tales of tricksters; each tribe presenting its own set of tales, and each expressing the power of the trickster to overcome forces seemingly greater than themselves. Charlotte native Gail Haley, winner of the Caldecott Medal, collected one such tale in *Two Bad Boys: A Very Old Cherokee Tale* (1996). Hers is but one of many collections of such tales. Like Brer Rabbit and Haley's Boy, the trickster character uses their wits to overcome the odds against them. And, one such trickster with a long history is the character known as Jack. Tales featuring Jack originated in Europe and found a home in the Appalachian Mountains. Some of these tales can be found in a collection by Richard Chase, *The Jack Tales: Folk Tales from the Southern Appalachians* (1943). These Jack tales, like other Trickster Tales, highlight the importance of both innocence and awareness in overcoming odds.

Like a trickster overcoming adversity, I too changed my course, beginning my ascent out of the spiraling descent into Wonderland, climbing a Beanstalk to find out, for myself and hopefully for you and the children around you my dear reader, examples of what Southern Literature is for young readers today. Each leaf of the beanstalk led to a different road and perhaps the first book that branched out led me to the road traced by Mildred D. Taylor in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976). Each day Cassie and her siblings walk the long road to The Great Faith Elementary and Secondary School and, each day, they must vie with the bus, filled with white children, headed for the Jefferson Davis County School. Like the trickster Brer Rabbit, Cassie and her siblings hatch a scheme to thwart the bus. A rainy day and a large hole dug by this group of tricksters bring their daily assault of mud slung from tires to a screeching halt. The bus sinks and wallows and the tricksters win... at least for a short time.

Taylor's book is a chronicle of the hardships of life in Mississippi in the 1930's. From encounters with unwanted, battered school books to the threats and actions of the KKK, the South's history is explored through a child's eyes. For Cassie and her family there is power in who they are and the land on which they

live. Instilled in the Logan children is the knowledge that, "All that belongs to you. You aren't never had to live on nobody's place but your own and long as I live and the family survives, you'll never have to. That's important. You may not understand that now, but one day you will. Then you'll see" (Taylor 7). Like Cassie, the land and the setting become integral to the story, shedding light on what the South is and what it means to those who tread its soil.

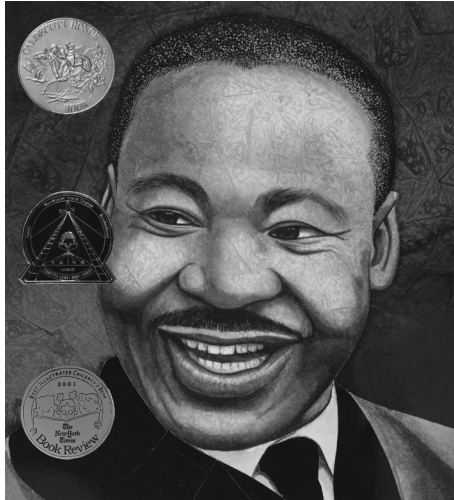
Perhaps one of my favorite books highlights this sense of place and grounding and shows the power that comes from inside in a setting that is itself an obstacle. *That Book Woman*, a picture book by Heather Henson and illustrated by David Small (2008) follows the life of Cal, a young boy who wants nothing more than to help his father in the Appalachian Mountains. But the persistent Book Woman keeps visiting, bringing with her a chance to grow. Hers is not an easy road, "but here she'll come right through the rain and fog and cold." She will not take a trade for her books, but gives them in the hope that they will bring light to those like Cal and his family. This book was inspired by the Pack Horse Librarians of the Appalachian Mountains in Kentucky, a project started as part of President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration in the 1930's. Picture Books are often a child's first introduction into the world of reading and books such as this by Henson not



only provide a glimpse into the world of literature, they also provide a glimpse into history.

As we find in the picture book by Henson, so too do the leaves of my Beanstalk lead me to other illustrated works for children that seek to present the history of the American South. Patricia Polacco's *Pink and Say*, *Unspoken: A Story from the Underground Railroad* by Henry Cole, *Follow the Drinking Gourd* by Jeanette Winter, *Freedom Song: The Story of Henry "Box" Brown* by Sally W. Walker and other picture books for all ages provide a glimpse at southern history and the impacts of slavery and race. Picture books also show the power of the individual and the force that comes from believing in and seeking the rights we all deserve. Books like *Let the Children March* by Monica Clark-Robinson, *Martin's Big Words: The Life of Martin Luther King Jr.* by Doreen Rappaport, and *If a Bus Could Talk* by Faith Ringgold convey the power of words and actions to fight for what is right and just. The list of picture books is seemingly endless once one begins looking. And it is picture books like these that provide a first glimpse into the hard history of the South leading readers over time to books like that by Taylor that continue to explore this history through the eyes of children.

Stemming from this history are books that explore the South in the late 1950's and early 1960's. Among these, in my opinion, two stand out for the strength of the characters therein. *The Lions of Little Rock* by Kristin Levine (2012) and *The Watson's Go to Birmingham-1963* (1995) by Christopher Paul Curtis. In both of these books, segregation is explored and its harsh realities revealed as it seeks to tear families, friends and communities apart. These books also provide a glimpse into the Civil Rights Movement. In *The Lions of Little Rock* the reader meets Marlee and sees how racism and bias has the power to tear two friends apart. In Curtis' work, the reader travels with the young Kenny and his family and watches as his sister is almost lost to them in a church bombing. Despite the overwhelming odds against these children, they are



able to find the internal strength they need to learn how valuable it is to "keep on stepping."

Southern Literature for children provides insight into the past by providing a narrative of racial memory, but it too also looks at the "narrative of the southern environment." As I branched out to explore this aspect, I again returned to Mildred Taylor whose look at the land held such significance for the Logan family. In her book, Taylor shows the beauty of the land, but also how unforgiving it can be. In Katherine Patterson's Newbery Medal winning *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977), set in Virginia, we find the tale of two friends; the artistic runner Jesse and the new girl to town, Leslie, and are welcomed along as they create their own Wonderland across the creek in the mythical land of Terabithia. Under Leslie's glow, Jesse grows, but too soon, the land takes Leslie. In this way loss and overcoming tragedy become a theme that travels through Children's Literature as in life as we all will eventually experiencing the loss of something or someone we love.

*Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls, *Shiloh* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, *The Yearling* by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo present children coping with the juxtaposition of feelings stemming from love and loss. In all of these works, the connection between children and the animals with whom they find comfort and nurturing become a means that provides a connection between the child and their families, their communities and themselves. Without her mother, India Opal Buloni, the main character in DiCamillo's *Because of Winn-Dixie*, has only her preacher father to depend on. When he uproots their small family to Florida, Opal is lost. She has nothing, no one, not even her mother to connect to just the mystery of who this woman was and why she left. Standing in the grocery store, looking to buy some macaroni and cheese, Opal becomes the inadvertent owner of Winn-Dixie, a mangy brown dog who looks like "a piece of old brown carpet that had been left out in the rain" (11). Despite, or maybe because of his looks, Opal and the preacher take in Winn-Dixie and in so



Jody Finds the Fawn

doing they take in the community around them.

For Opal, the mangy Winn-Dixie becomes a connection to the world, teaching her about fear and loss and helping her explore what she has vanished from her life in her mother's absence and see what she has gained in the residents of Naomi, Florida. She learns that "There ain't no way you can hold onto something that wants to go, you understand? You can only love what you got while you got it" (159). And, this is what we see in many works for children. Like Dicomillo. Rawls, in *Where the Red Fern Grows*, seems to echo what Gloria Dump tells Opal when he says, "I'd like to walk up to the hillside to the graves of my dogs. I'm sure the red fern has grown and has completely covered those two little mounds. I know it is still there, hiding its secret beneath those long red leaves, but it wouldn't be hidden from me for part of my life is buried there, too. Yes, I know it is still there, for in my heart I believe the legend of the scared red fern" (281-282).

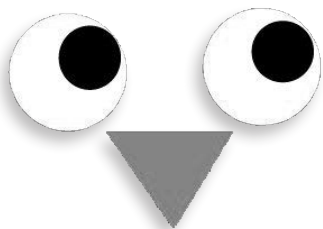
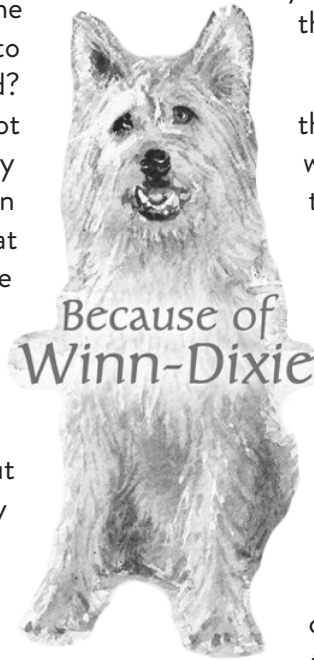
And, it is the legends and the lore of the land that brings us a sense of place in these and more examples of Southern Literature for Children. Like the Logan land, The Ozarks hold meaning for Billy and provide him a connection to his past, his heritage and his sense of place. The Ozarks provide him something to hold on to and to cherish. For Roy Eberhardt, Florida is "Disney World in an armpit compared to Montana" but things are going to be interesting, there is no doubt of that when one looks at the clever Newbery Honor winner *Hoot* by Carl Hiaasen (2002).

Known for his adult novels which highlight Florida and the Everglades and show the damage that humans do to this pristine wilderness, all with a wry twist, Hiaasen's first book for children showcases Florida and shows the importance of the land and what a concern for its preservation means for the flora and fauna of this indigenous area... all through the eyes of children. When Mother Paula's Pancake House decides to build a new location in Roy's town of Coconut Cove, Mullet

Fingers steps in to protect the burrowing owls living there. In the end it is up to the two boys to preserve the land and protect the animals that call it home. Told with Hiaasen's signature style (of which I am admittedly a huge fan), children learn about friendship, about fighting for what you believe in, and the importance of protecting those that cannot protect themselves.

Hiaasen's work helps to elucidate the fact that Children's Literature is about the struggles we face. Whether set in the South or spanning the globe... whether modern realistic fiction or historical fiction, Southern Children's Literature is about the reality of life both past and present. Southern Literature for Children is a Beanstalk leading to the leaves children experience as they grow up in the world, surrounded by the people who help give it for, the cultures that help define it, and the histories that have shaped it. Southern Literature can be seen as encompassing the "narrative of the (un) changing South" and, so it is. The history of the South has shaped it, but the influences of each day have allowed it to change and continue to change within a world that is itself constantly changing. And, it is this change that helps create meaning and will continue to define what the South is and what Southern Children's Literature is and will become as the Beanstalk grows and spreads its leaves.

**Theresa "Tree" Martus** has worked for over 15 years with the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library and has held many positions within this organization. She possesses a MA in Children's Literature from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and a MLIS from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She currently works at the Mint Hill Branch Library in Mint Hill, North Carolina, providing library services for children and teens as well as programming for teens and adults with special needs.

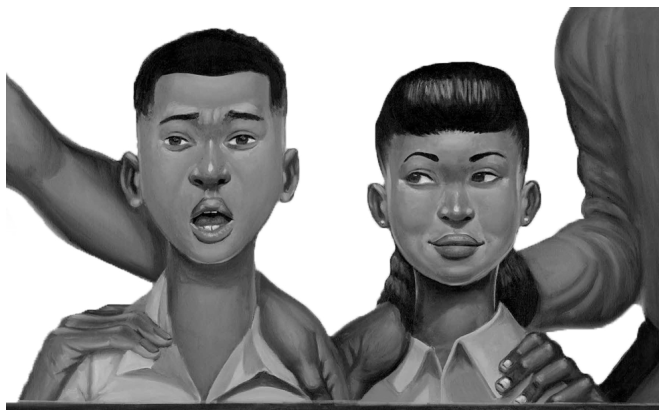




# PICTURE BOOKS

## Let the Children March

Clark-Robinson, Monica. Illustrated by Frank Morrison. *Let the Children March*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2018.



Set in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, this historically based picture book tells the story of a brother and a sister who can do something that their parents cannot, march with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Although they are young, too young in the eyes of many, the children know that “we are not too young to want our freedom.” On a sunny Thursday in May the children come, dressed in their finest Sunday clothes and, hand in hand, they march for freedom. They are threatened by the police but no fear of dogs, water hoses or jail can stop them as on they march. Even jailed, they sing out, and their voices are heard by the nation. The children know that “with nothing more than our feet, voices, and courage, we had done what others could not.” Change would come and desegregation would begin all because the children led the way. This picture book comprised of simple text and large, engaging illustrations provides a look into a specific moment in time that changed the nation. The afterword provides historical information to help lay the stage for the events described in the pages of Clark-Robinson’s picture book.



## Sody Sallyratus

Compton, Joanne. Illustrated by Keen Compton. *Sody Sallyratus*. New York: Holiday House, 1995.

A delightful picture book that brings a new Jack tale to the tradition of folktales collected by Richard Chase in his *Grandfather Tales* (1948). In the introduction, the Compton’s acknowledge their familiarity with Chase’s tale, *Sody Sallyratus*. The Compton’s sought to bring this story to life for the North Carolina school children for whom they were telling tales. Soon this story, with parallels to other Appalachian tales took on new life as the Compton’s retold

the tale including the folkloric Jack character of Appalachian tradition. One fine day, Jack and his brothers are visiting their Ma when she realizes that she has run out of Sody Sallyratus (baking soda) and without it, “I can’t be baking biscuits!” So, off Tom runs to the store to fetch some sody. But he doesn’t come back... so off Will goes to look for him. And, Will doesn’t come back. Ma is frustrated so off she goes to look for her boys. Ma doesn’t come back. Well, that leaves Jack to head out to Cold Water Creek looking for them. What follows is a classic trickster tale in the tradition of the Mountain Jack tales from the American south.

## That Book Woman

Henson, Heather. Illustrated by David Small. *That Book Woman*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2008.

Henson's stunning picture book illustrated by David Small was inspired by the true stories of the courageous women known as the Pack Horse Librarians of the Appalachian Mountains in Kentucky. The Pack Horse Library program was founded by President Roosevelt in the 1930's as part of the Works Progress Administration. The purpose was to bring books to rural areas that existed beyond the range of schools or libraries. The story follows Cal who lives with his family in such an area high up in the mountains, miles from anything and anyone. It is a shock to him when the woman rides up. Cal's sister Lark loves to read, but how useful is reading when he can be spending his days helping Pap on the farm? And, what does the woman on horseback bring? Why books! But for Cal that is "no treasure." What follows is the tale of the grit and determination of both the Book Woman and Cal to overcome odds as harsh as winter storms and narrow mountain passageway to show how brave they both are.



## Stitchin' and Pullin': A Gee's Bend Quilt

McKissack, Patricia. Illustrated by Cozbi A. Cabrera. *Stitchin' and Pullin': A Gee's Bend Quilt*. New York: Random House, 2008.

Set in Gee's Bend, located in Wilcox County, Alabama, McKissack's picture book traces the history of an area that sprang from the time of the Civil War when plantations owned by white slave owners filled the land. As times progressed, the emancipated slaves made a home in Gee's Bend keeping old traditions alive. One of these traditions was that of quilt making. Quilts made by the women of this area now hang in museums. Listening to the stories of her grandmother and the other quilting women, our young narrator learns the history of generations of women who have shaped, not only beautiful quilts, but the fabric of Gee's Bend. Each patch added to the quilt brings with it a piece of the past from the times of the slaves to desegregation and beyond. Included is an introduction that provides historical information about Gee's Bend and an author's note that shares McKissack's own experiences visiting and joining in the quilting and hearing the stories of the past. A beautiful book by a three time Coretta Scott King Honor winner and Newbery Honor author that chronicles a time and place filled with tradition and strength.

## Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood up by Sitting Down

*Pinkney, Andrea Davis. Illustrated by Brian Pinkney. Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood up by Sitting Down. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010.*

From the talented storyteller Andrea Davis Pinkney comes the story of the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. On February 1st, 1960 four friends took seats at the counter looking for a meal, but more so looking to uphold the powerful words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "we must... meet hate with love." They sit and wait under the sign that says "Whites Only" to be acknowledged and served. For the friends, "integration was better than any chef's special... finer than homemade cake. Integration was a recipe that would take time." And the friends have time, so they wait. The next day, they wait some more... as do more students like them yearning for a change. What started with four friends spread from lunch counter to lunch counter; from Nashville to Atlanta until the nation took notice. People watched on their televisions friends seeking "the true meaning of peace." Ella Baker took notice and organized a student leadership conference at Shaw University that led to the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) proclaiming their message, "We are all leaders." The work of four friends turned into something great as, two years later, President Johnson turned the Civil Rights Act into law. This stunning picture book by the talented Pinkney family is a testament to four friends whose simple request for coffee and doughnuts brought about a new era in America. The book contains an afterword filled with historical information about the time period and the four friends whose tale is told through Andrea's text, quotes by Martin Luther King, Jr. and given shape by the talented hand of Caldecott Winning Illustrator, Brian Pinkney.



## Hey, Charleston: The True Story of the Jenkins Orphanage Band

*Rockwell, Anne. Illustrated by Colin Bootman. Hey, Charleston: The True Story of the Jenkins Orphanage Band. Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, 2013.*

In this beautiful non-fiction picture book, Rockwell chronicles the history of the Reverend Daniel Joseph Jenkins and the orphanage he started in 1891 in Charleston, South Carolina. Soon, all too soon, the orphanage fills with hundreds of children needing care and Jenkins is left seeking a means to support them all. To this end he turns to the residents of Charleston who donate musical instruments of all kinds, many having come from Civil War soldiers. Through the restoration of the instruments and music lessons for the orphans, Jenkins soon brings music to the streets of Charleston. Before long, people are calling for the band to "Give us some rag!" and "the kids knew just what to do." Jenkins work providing from the orphans, provided these children the chance to bring music to the streets of Charleston. Jenkin's band had the honor of playing in the inaugural parade for President Theodore Roosevelt. Jenkins continued to spread his philanthropy to those in need and he and his orphan band found peace knowing that they could sleep at night having "turned bad into good."



## Coat of Many Colors

Parton, Dolly. Illustrated by Brooke Boynton-Hughes. *Coat of Many Colors*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 2016.



In this charming picture book, illustrations bring to life the well-known lyrics to Dolly Parton’s *Coat of Many Colors*. Growing up in rural Tennessee, Parton’s family struggled to make ends meet and to provide for their children. Parton’s song is depicted in this colorful picture book. Fall is coming and young Dolly doesn’t have a coat to wear, but someone gives the family a box of rags and her mother turns these scraps into something beautiful. Dolly loves her coat, but the children at school tease her. Despite the hurtful words

of her classmates, young Dolly doesn’t feel shame. She tells them the story her Mama told her about Joseph’s coat of many colors and how her coat is “worth more than all their clothes” because it was made with love by her mother’s hands and carries with it good fortunes and promise. Some may never understand that as they may see a poor rag coat, but “one is only poor only if they choose to be.” Soft illustrations and mellifluous words make this a charming picture book to share with young readers.

## CHAPTER BOOKS FOR OLDER READERS

### Where the Watermelons Grow

Baldwin, Cindy. *Where the Watermelons Grow*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2018.



Della Kelly has spent her whole life in Maryville, North Carolina. Della’s father is a farmer and she loves nothing more than the watermelons he grows. And it is the watermelon that lets her know that trouble is coming for her mother from the inside. Della’s mother struggles with O.C.D and a slow spiral has begun that Della has seen before. Della’s father is struggling too. A drought has taken hold, threatening their livelihood and pulling

him away from his family when they need his help the most. Thus begins Della’s quest to find the means to cure her mother and save her family from a downward spiral. Having spent all the days of her twelve years in Maryville, Della knows just where to turn... to Miss Tabitha Quigley, the Bee Lady, as “it was pretty well accepted that the Bee Lady’s honey could cheer you up if you were feeling down, or fix your broken heart, or help you see things clearer when you had big decisions to make” (19). Perhaps this woman and her special honey can help pull Della’s mother away from the brink of scrubbing floors until her hands are raw and picking seeds of watermelon late into the night. But perhaps there is more that needs to be healed than just her mother. Della is afraid that “Miss Tabitha was right and that my stubborn heart was a thing that needed fixin’, not mama’s brain” (195). Set in North Carolina, Della’s struggles are universal for anyone, adult or child, who has had to deal with the battles families face. But Della will soon learn that there is “no sickness in the world” that “could make my mama’s love for us any less real” (231).

## Serafina and the Black Cloak

Beatty, Robert. *Serafina and the Black Cloak*. New York: Disney-Hyperion, 2015.

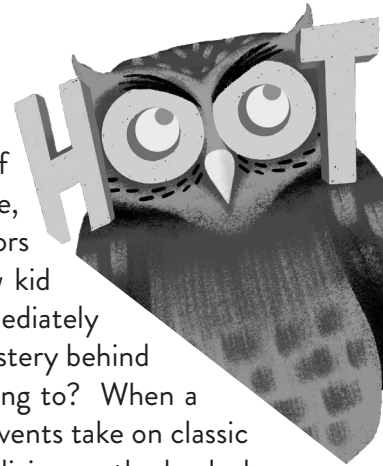


Set at the historic Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina comes an alluring mystery by Robert Beatty. Serafina is an invisible girl living within the halls of this historic mansion with her father, the maintenance man for the estate. Her presence unknown, she roams the halls and knows the secrets of the Vanderbilt's. But, what she does not know is who the man in the black cloak is and what he is doing with the children he is kidnapping. For Serafina, there are "so many questions, so many mysteries to solve" (117). These mysteries will lead her and her new found friend, Braeden Vanderbilt, into the woods surrounding the estate. What she finds is frightening... for, is it the man that is truly evil, or perhaps there is a greater mystery, one that lies in the folds of the cloak he wears. This is the first book in a series and a great read for older mystery lovers.

## Hoot

Hiaasen, Carl. *Hoot*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

From the clever mind of Carl Hiaasen comes this, his first in a line of books for children that highlight his love and passion for protection of the environment. Welcome to Coconut Grove, Florida filled with sunshine, warm summer winds, bullies, painted copperheads, potty-trained alligators and a boy who will not stop running. Into this mix is thrown the "new kid in town," Roy. Roy's welcome is anything but congenial as he is immediately singled out by a bully named Dana. His only escape seems to be the mystery behind the running boy. Who is he? Why is he running and where is he running to? When a pancake house franchise rolls into town looking to build a new location, events take on classic Hiaasen zaniness as our running boy tries to protect the burrowing owls living on the land where the restaurant is destined to go. But it isn't the running boy, a.k.a. Mullet Fingers alone, Roy has come to realize that "it wasn't just about the owls, it was about everything—all the birds and animals, all the wild places that were in danger of being wiped out" (205). Soon the passion of the children is felt by the adults who slowly come to understand that, pancakes are delicious, but the preservation of a species is vital. This Newbery Honor Book provides readers an entertaining introduction to a serious topic.





## Strawberry Girl

Lenski, Lois. *Strawberry Girl*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1943.

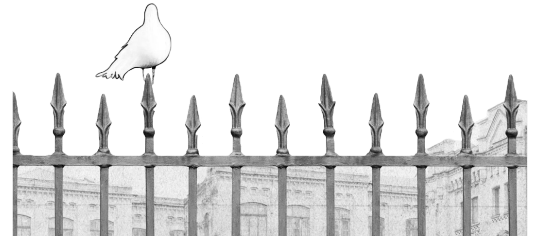
Set in the flatwoods of rural Florida, this 1946 Newbery Award winner is part of a series by Lenski that seeks to paint a picture of a region of the country and the people who make that place home. *Strawberry Girl* is an exploration of the people known as the “Florida Crackers” and chronicles life as seen through the eyes of Birdie Boyer. The Boyer’s have just moved from Marion County to the flatwoods and are seeking

to make a home there “studyin’ to sell oranges and strawberries and sweet taters and sich to make us a good livin’” (8). What follows are the often funny and often testing trials and tribulations faced by the family as they come to terms with life in this region of Florida. From loose hogs, school bullies who beat up the teacher, alligators and constant encounters, both good and bad, with the neighbors, The Slaters, Lenski’s work paints a picture of the Crackers through dialect and experiences which she notes comes from time spent visiting Crackers in their homes and learning their ways. Lenski’s illustrations help to truly paint a picture and capture a moment in time and a people living lives rich in tradition faced with an ever changing world.

## The Lions of Little Rock

Levine, Kristin. *The Lions of Little Rock*. New York: Puffin Books, 2012.

Set in Little Rock, Arkansas, Levine’s book is a tale of friendship set against the backdrop of the integration of the Little Rock School System in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s. Marlee is growing up in the midst of conflict and the conflict is apparent in her own home as she faces the debates between her own parents who stand juxtaposed on the issue of integration. Outside of the house, Marlee is the quiet one in class. She keeps her head down, but when a new girl joins her class, Marlee finds that they are drawn to each other and soon the two become friends and Liz slowly works on bringing Marlee out of her shell. But not everything is as it seems. Marlee is pulled out of class and told that Liz will not be back to school as she is very ill. It is not illness that is keeping Liz away. Liz, an African American, has been passing as white and Marlee is told that Liz “was her friend. Now she is someone else” (73). But just as the road to integration was a battle, so too is the road Marlee and Liz take to overcome the odds and stay friends. This piece of historical fiction chronicles a time in history through the eyes of the children who lived it, facing their fears, the reality of the Klu Klux Klan, bombings and the impacts of segregation.





## Tru & Nelle

*Neri, G. Tru & Nelle. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2016.*

Did you know that while they were growing up two of the South's most influential authors were friends? Neri explores this friendship in her fictionalized account of the real-life friendship of Truman Capote and Nelle Harper Lee. In short, episodic chapters, Neri traces their friendship, introducing the characters, their families and the city of Monroeville, Alabama. The reader follows the two friends as they meet Nelle's father A.C., a lawyer and see the hard truths of Tru's broken home. Together these two friends become investigators, seeking out and trying to solve the mysteries they find around them. A clever book for middle grade readers, filled with information about the two beloved authors of the American classics *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*.



## The Secret of Gumbo Grove

*Tate, Eleanora E. The Secret of Gumbo Grove. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Books for Young Readers, 1987.*

Welcome to Gumbo Grove, South Carolina, home of Raisin Stackhouse. Growing up and going to school, Raisin learned all about the history of the white people in Calvary County, but what about her ancestors and her heritage? While exploring the local cemetery of the New Africa Bible Baptist Church, Raisin begins upon a mission to learn all she can from Miss Effie, an older woman, who has in her head all that the record books do not... a history of the African Americans who helped shape Gumbo Grove. Listening to the stories Miss Effie tells, Raisin becomes impassioned about preserving the past. But what can be done in a city that doesn't seem to value the past hidden in this run-down cemetery? Leave it to Raisin! Through perseverance and her unbreakable will, Raisin will inspire a town to keep safe the past that has helped shape them for future generations so that children, like her, do not grow up feeling bad "about not knowing our history" (199).

## Three Times Lucky

*Turnage, Shelia. Three Times Lucky. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 2012.*

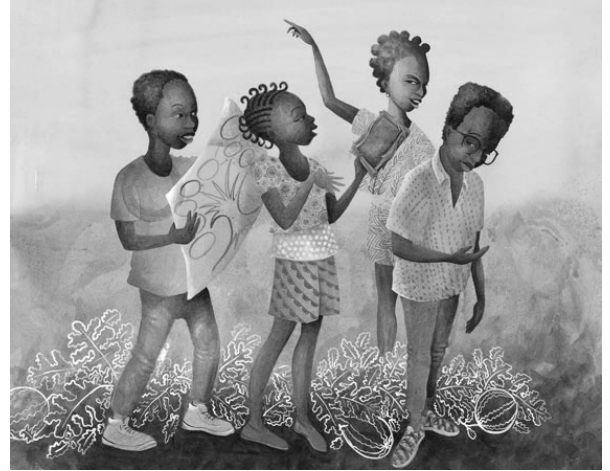
Welcome to Tupelo Landing, North Carolina, home of Moses LoBeau. Mo appeared one night during a hurricane having floated down the river where she was found and taken in by the Colonel, a man with a past as unknown as her own, and Miss Lana. With her friend Dale Earnhardt Johnson III, Mo is ready to spend another hot summer working in the Colonel's restaurant serving peanut butter and cucumber sandwiches and Mountain Dew. But things take a turn when Mr. Jesse, the mean neighbor, is murdered. Mo and Dale decide to take up the case. With a hurricane rolling into town, things take a turn when Mo's house is ransacked and Miss Lana is kidnapped. Soon secrets are revealed and true identities are discovered, all thanks to Mo and Dale and a stormy chain of events. This is the first book in the Mo & Dale Mystery series by Turnage.



# Going Down Home with Daddy

*Going Down Home with Daddy* by Kelly Starling Lyons; illus. by Daniel Minter. ISBN 978-1561459384. Peachtree Publishing, 2019.

*Going Down Home with Daddy* is a warm, vibrant picture book about a multigenerational Black family's connection to their history, their land, and one another. A 2020 Caldecott Honor book, as well as an ALSC Notable Children's Book for 2020, it is the second award-winning collaboration between author Kelly Starling Lyons and illustrator Daniel Minter. (Their first, *Ellen's Broom* (Putnam, 2012) won a Coretta Scott King Award in 2013.) *Going Down Home with Daddy* follows the experience of Lil Alan as he, his sister, and their parents attend the annual family reunion at his paternal great-grandmother's house and farm, "down home" in the American South.



Lil Alan's family rises early on "reunion morning" and leaves their city home, arriving at Granny's farm around sunrise. As they journey, Lil Alan feels excitement about the upcoming reunion, noticing that he can't stop smiling, can't wait to see Granny and hang out with his cousins. However, amid the anticipation, there is conflict for Lil Alan: he is unprepared for the annual ceremony in which the young people of the family offer tributes to their great-grandmother. He finds out that Sis is singing Granny's favorite song, "His Eye is on the Sparrow," Cousin Isaiah is reading a Langston Hughes poem, and Cousin Devin made a scrapbook. But so far, Lil Alan has nothing to offer. Or so he thinks.

His worry builds, and finally Lil Alan asks his father for advice. "Think with your heart," Daddy tells him, but it's up to Lil Alan to figure out what that means. When Daddy takes Lil Alan and the cousins on a tractor ride around the farm, he points out the livestock, the fields of cotton, the pecan trees, the smokehouse and the fishing pond. Daddy's arm reaches across the spread of fields towards the horizon as he shares his memories of his grandfather saying, "Everything you see is ours." Later, as Lil Alan continues to participate in the family activities, he realizes that his tribute should be rooted in everything he sees when he is there on the farm.

Lil Alan reflects on the joy he feels in connecting with his family, and how deeply the land is enmeshed in his history; in doing so, he finds his offering: an object poem in which the symbols of the land – cotton, pecans, and most importantly, the soil itself, are highlighted and connected to the sacrifices and hard work of those who came before him. In this, and his family's appreciation and approval, Lil Alan solidifies his sense of self.



At an important moment in the celebration, Daddy speaks of the family's history. He reminds them of their African origins, mentioning that the family ancestors had been held as slaves on this land, and had



“made a way out of no way,” with Granny and Pa eventually purchasing the land 75 years before. “And look at us now,” Daddy finishes, signaling that it is time for the children to present their tributes. This tradition embodies the notion that creative, active appreciation of one’s heritage and history is a gift of gratitude to previous generations.

Daniel Minter’s acrylic wash illustrations reinforce that idea. The color palette alternates, with some spreads glowing in all the greens, golds, and russets of a farm on a sunny afternoon, others awash in sepia tones and shades of blue. Comprised of portraits, silhouettes, and landscapes, overlaid with block printed symbols, the illustrations are layered with meaning. The block prints are especially notable, as they are symbols of African origin; specifically, West Ghanaian Adrinka symbols that represent the values present in the text, including the importance of learning from the past. Other block printed images repeated through the story include okra, pecans, cotton, gourds, and vines, all evocative of a prosperous, abundant farm in the American South. Another repeated image is that of trees, on the family’s reunion shirts, as well as on Granny’s dress in the final image of the book. Although the illustrations are bright, bold, and joyful, one cannot help but sense the deep history that underscores the story.

In a recent interview, Lyons shared that she wants her writing to “evoke emotion, transport you through dialogue and setting.” She accomplishes that in *Going Down Home with Daddy* with strong poetic sensibilities, creating a story that rings with excitement and familial love. Daddy hums as he packs the car, the children sit up “straight as pines” when they see Granny. Lil Alan rejoices as a “parade of family” arrives; relatives embrace, cousins play and laugh until their “hearts explode with joy.” The celebratory imagery is especially cozy with down-home comforts at the family dinner. The dining room “overflows with love-made dishes,” such classics of the American South as smoked turkey, collards, mac and cheese, okra and tomatoes, and of course, biscuits “oozing” with jelly. Even, and especially, here, history is honored, as Lil Alan notices that they’re gathered “hand in hand” around a table Pa built for Granny, as Granny reminds them that nothing is more important than family. And as Daddy says, “there’s nothing like going down home.”

*Going Down Home with Daddy* is a vivid, loving portrait of an American family brimming with powerful culture and rich tradition.

Reviewed by Jessica Camargo



# Thinker: My Puppy Poet and Me

*Thinker: My Puppy Poet and Me.* By Eloise Greenfield; illus. by Ehsan Abdollahi.  
ISBN 1492677248 Sourcebooks Jabberwocky, 2019.

What if your new puppy was a poet? In this story-in-verse, Coretta Scott King award winning author Eloise Greenfield, and acclaimed illustrator Ehsan Abdollahi, play with the idea, resulting in the colorful, sensitive book for young readers entitled *Thinker: My Puppy Poet and Me*.

Seven-year-old Jace, along with his sister Kimmy and their parents, adopt a puppy, as revealed in the opening poem, “Naming Me.” The puppy hears the family considering giving him a cute name, and speaks up, saying, “No way! I’m deep and I’m a poet. No! A cute name’s not okay.” Jace, hearing this, names the puppy Thinker. Thinker continues to speak, narrating many of the 16 poems, most of which are free verse, but include haiku and rap.



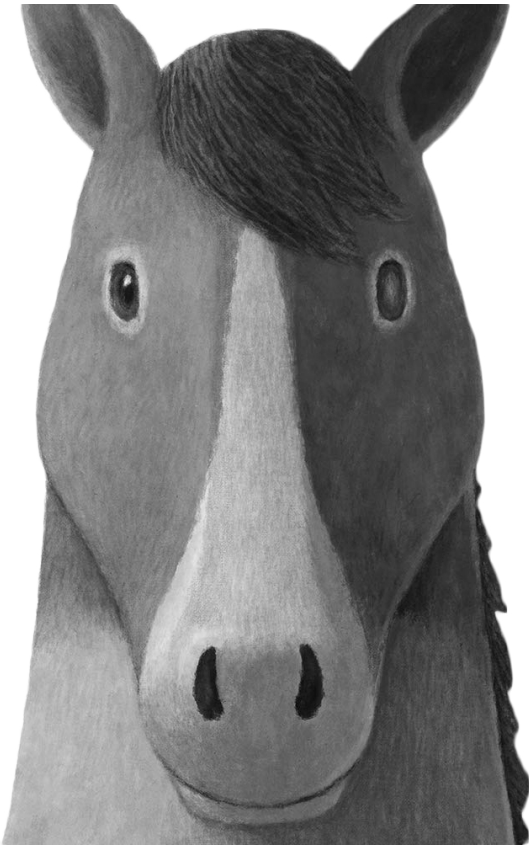
As Thinker and Jace play together, they exchange poems to share their ideas; with the dialogic poems especially, Greenfield artfully suggests Thinker as an extension of Jace’s thoughts. In “Two Poets Talking,” the pals share the ways in which poetry helps them make sense of things, express themselves, or simply make music. With “Tell Me Jace,” and “Jace’s Answer,” Thinker asks the types of questions that children often ask, such as “why is ice cold?” And more poignantly, “why are some people mean and others nice?” Jace’s reply, “I don’t know...Let’s keep learning what life is all about,” is comforting, open-hearted, and positive.

As much as he wants to, Thinker can’t go to school with Jace. While the reader knows that this is because pets don’t go to school, both Thinker and Jace believe that it is because if Thinker says his poems at school, the other children will think that Jace is “a weird kid, with a weird pet.” In this way, Greenfield deftly relates Jace’s nervousness about Thinker’s abilities to any child’s feelings about being different. When Pets Day arrives and Jace finally brings Thinker to school, it’s just as he feared: Thinker recites poetry in front of the class.

Rather than causing embarrassment for Jace, it results in acceptance, not just for Thinker, but for all the visiting pets, who then feel free to show off their talents: the cat sings, the fish dance. The illustration of this scene is given prominence, set apart on a full spread with no text. The picture is busy with laughing children, cavorting pets, and notably, a smiling teacher; this is the moment of acceptance, both for self and others. After this, the penultimate poem, “That’s My Puppy,” shows that Jace is proud of Thinker, telling him, “keep on being your cool self,” which is, essentially, the message of the book to all readers. The final poem, “Thinker’s Rap,” celebrates the satisfaction and pride Thinker feels in his accomplishment, ending the story with a happy “Goodbye” as he goes in the house with his family.

Abdollahi’s illustrations are lively, portraying busy scenes of family, parks, playgrounds and classrooms. His handmade, hand-colored paper collages are an appropriate medium, reminiscent of children’s art, and therefore just right for expressing a child’s creative world. His depictions of Jace’s family, their neighborhood and diverse community, and the natural world are joyful, textured, and, in keeping with the themes of the text, colorful and bold. Dedicated by Greenfield “with love, to the children of the world,” *Thinker: My Puppy Poet and Me* is a gentle reminder that we should be ourselves, believe in our talents, and share our gifts with the world.

**Reviewed by Jessica Camargo**



## This Way, Charlie

*This Way, Charlie.* Written by Caron Levis and illustrated by Charles Santoso. ISBN: 141974206X. Abrams, 2020.

*This Way, Charlie*, written by Caron Levis and illustrated by Charles Santoso, tells the story of an unlikely friendship between Charlie, a blind horse, and Jack, a goat with significant trust issues that are the result of previous trauma. Inspired by the friendship between two real animals at the Wild Heart Ranch Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Center, Levis and Santoso focus on themes of empathy, healing, and trust throughout the story as Jack and Charlie help one another learn to navigate through personal struggles to find that life still offers joy and kindness for each of them.

Set at the fictional Open Bud Ranch, a home for the rehabilitation of all kinds of animals, Jack meets Charlie when the two literally run into each other. Jack learns that Charlie is blind in one eye, while readers are immediately clued in to the fact that Jack is overwhelmed by traumatic memories of his life before coming to Open Bud Ranch. While that trauma is never explored explicitly within the world of the book, Jack's fear of others, the barn, and anything else that reminds him of his earlier experiences makes it apparent that this sweet goat is not used to kindness or compassion. Jack is afraid to need anyone or trust anyone, but as he realizes that perhaps Charlie needs a friend, and perhaps Charlie needs someone who he can trust, the lives of both of these animals are transformed as each finds within the other a path toward hope.

Santoso's illustrations are simultaneously beautiful and heartbreaking, taking readers beyond the words of the story and into an actual experience of the emotions at play. When Charlie becomes blind in both eyes, Santoso thrusts readers into a world of darkness that only becomes brighter as the horse's footsteps become synced with Jack's. When Jack has an emotional breakdown triggered by the idea of reaching out to even more of the animals on the farm for friendship, Santoso illustrates a close examination of the tension in Jack's face as reds and oranges and blues fill the air around him, as if all of the blue sky and peaceful fields that had surrounded him have disappeared while he is trapped in memories of the past.

Levis and Santoso center their story around the idea that there are things we cannot see in the experiences of others, but that learning to feel with them is what matters the most. Young readers and older readers alike will find that this touching story offers lessons in compassion from which everyone can benefit. With its beautiful illustrations and simple yet insightful prose, *This Way, Charlie*, is a timeless new classic that does not shy away from life's difficulties even as it helps readers see that love and patience can make a difference in all of our lives.

**Reviewed by Samantha Holt**

# Me and Mama

*Me and Mama. Written and Illustrated by Cozbi A. Cabrera. ISBN: 1534454217. Simon & Schuster, 2020.*

Through lyrical prose and painted acrylic illustrations, Cozbi A. Cabrera’s Caldecott and Coretta Scott King honor-winning book allows us to see through her unnamed female protagonist’s eyes into a home and world that celebrates the safety and security of Mama’s presence. Cabrera’s protagonist begins her day with Mama’s singing and ends it by dreaming of all of the beautiful parts of her day, resting in the peace of knowing that among those things “[t]here’ll be me and Mama” (37).

Although Cabrera’s story takes place over the course of a rainy day, the vivid hues of the illustrations bring life and wonder to each moment. Bright colors bring excitement to everyday objects such as toothbrushes and rainboots, while in other moments colors blend together to create impressionistic images that offer a stylistic break from the realism present throughout most of the illustrations. Impressionistic illustrations tend to coincide with the most poetic of Cabrera’s language—moss that the protagonist sees as “velvet,” stores that “are boxes filled with people,” sky that is “taller than the trees”— offering artistic imagery that reflects the differences between the ordinary pieces of the protagonist’s day and how she interprets her external world through her internal imagination (23, 26).

Often, the protagonist focuses on the similarities and differences between herself and Mama. They both have boots, but in different colors and sizes. They both have special cups, but one is more durable than the other. Through such comparisons, the protagonist’s admiration for Mama is evident, and Mama’s love for her daughter shines through each page. Cabrera depicts special moments between the two, such as mother and daughter combing one another’s hair or the protagonist telling stories in order to see Mama laugh. Despite the rain outside, Mama’s presence in the protagonist’s life makes ordinary moments and objects seem magical, allowing the book to work as a celebration of the bond between mother and daughter.

**Reviewed by Samantha Holt**



# Goddess in the Machine

*Goddess in the Machine*. By Lora Beth Johnson. ISBN 1984835920. Razorbill, 2020.

REVIEW



Young adult fantasy novel *Goddess in the Machine* opens with a startling statement which sets the stage for a wonderfully exciting story: “When Andromeda woke, she was drowning.” Andra Watts entered a cryonic sleep alongside her family in the year 2161 and expected to be woken up one hundred years later on a newly colonized planet. Instead, when she finally emerges from stasis, she discovers it’s the year 3102: she is a thousand years too late. Everyone she knew—family, friends, *anyone*—has long since died. Now she finds herself in a world she doesn’t recognize on the brink of total destruction, confronted with an unimaginable truth: everyone on this new planet worships her as the goddess they believe has come to save their world.

While navigating this new terrain of Eerensed, Andra discovers that the English language has evolved through the centuries, and that what she considers simple technology the locals stand in awe of as magic. Because Andra is one of three “goddesses” who have awoken from their cryogenic sleep over the centuries, they believe she understands and can harness enough of this magic to save the world and its citizens from complete extinction. Through this mysterious reality, Andra meets the captivating Zhade, an exiled prince who has plans of his own for Andra, and he partners with her through breathtaking twists and turns in an effort to retake his throne from a vicious young king. But it is up to Andra to decide her fate—and the fate of the people of Eerensed—before they discover that she is not actually a goddess and kill her.

Some readers may find the subtle and not-so-subtle changes to the adapted English vocabulary take a little time to navigate at first, but will find that Johnson’s smart linguistic choices contribute to lush world-building and character development. Johnson knows how to bring readers along for a captivating journey and readers young and old will find it easy to identify with Andra, especially given our new, post-Covid-19 world. We have all seemingly woken up into a nightmarish world we don’t quite understand. Language itself has altered, the way we engage with each other through technology has drastically changed, there is a hope for a brighter tomorrow despite a grim current reality, and the world itself just seems a bit more complex than we’d like to imagine. Linking arms with Andra through this science fiction/fantasy adventure is a thrill for everyone who reads it, and *Goddess in the Machine* leaves us all anxiously awaiting its 2021 sequel.

**Reviewed by Ryan Weber**

# A Thousand White Butterflies

*A Thousand White Butterflies* by Jessica Betancourt-Perez & Karen Lynn Williams, illustrated by Gina Maldonado. ISBN 1580895778. Charlesbridge, 2021.

It is Isabella's first day of school in the United States. Her make-new-friends day. But when she wakes up, it is snowing so much outside the window that it looks like a thousand white mariposas. School is cancelled. There will be no new friends today. She hates snow. She sits on her bed and cries hot, lonely tears and misses her Papa and friends who are all still back in Colombia. But when she looks out the window and sees a girl her age fall down in the snow drifts, Isabella bundles up and runs outside to check on her. It turns out the girl is making snow angels. They don't understand everything each other says, but that doesn't seem to matter. Together, they build a snowman that Isabella dresses in her Papa's sombrero and rueda, and they laugh. That night, Isabella thinks about her nueva amiga and realizes that snow might not be so bad after all.

This is clearly a personal and heartfelt project for the co-authors, who dedicate the book with love and affection to immigrants in the United States. Betancourt-Perez immigrated from Colombia to the United States when she was a teenager and includes an author's note about her family's separation and reunion and how challenging it was to learn the language and adapt to cultural differences, and Williams is the granddaughter of immigrants as well. Their passion shows through in the simple effectiveness of the story, which is a beautiful first-person immigration story for young readers. The bilingual and cross-cultural quality is really effortlessly executed, with context clues to understand the Spanish without receiving a direct translation (which, very intelligently and subtly, gives the reader a hint of the part of the immigrant experience of having a native tongue different from the language of your host country and not yet achieving fluency).

The artwork is deliberately childish and simplistic in style, which supports the intimate first-person feelings that the book is addressing for children engaging with the book. There is one particularly wrenching page where she is sitting on her bed, crying, with the cat trying to comfort her, and all the loneliness and emotion of her experience are fully present in that spread. Overall, though, the message of hope and the promise of a blossoming friendship keep the story one of positivity and joy, even in the midst of a challenging life experience.

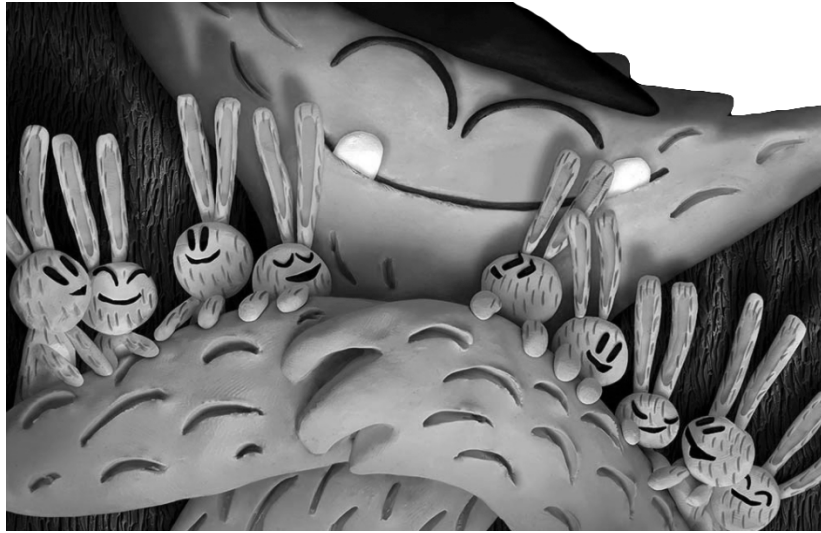


**Reviewed by Becca Worthington**

# Wolfboy

*Wolfboy* by Andy Harkness. ISBN 1547604425. Bloomsbury, 2021.

The moon was full, and Wolfboy was hungry. He stomped through the forest, splashed through the creek, slogged through the bog, climbed creaky trees, and leaped across steep ravines, all the while howling the repeated line, “Rabbits, rabbits! Where are you?” But the rabbits were nowhere to be seen, and Wolfboy kept getting hungrier. And huffier and droolier and growlier and fussier. By the time he arrives at Moonberry Meadow, he is starving. He crouches in wait, low and quiet, until finally the bunnies tentatively



poke out their ears and tails and then emerge into the field. Wolfboy leaps, teeth bared... to eat the moonberry pie that his rabbit friends made for him.

This book is genius. Harkness’ long and illustrious career in animation (25 years of experience at Disney on films like *Moana*, *Frozen*, *Big Hero 6*, and *Zootopia*, and now with Sony Pictures Animation Studio) is wonderfully evident in this book. Harkness uses darkness and light to create suspense and hold tension like a expert noir film for kids. It is so breathtakingly cinematic in its storytelling and execution that it’s practically an Oscar-winning Pixar short. Sure, in its most condensed version, it’s a clever story about being hangry, but it’s oh so much more.

The art process for this book (well documented on the author-illustrator’s Instagram feed @andyharknessart, if you’d like to watch him in action) is unprecedented, innovative, and utterly jaw-dropping. He begins with sketches that are projected onto glass as a sculpting guide, then he shapes the clay by hand and introduces details with a wooden tool, and the final sculptures are photographed in natural light and digitally painted with as little retouching as possible. This means that every leaf of every tree in every forest spread, the bark on every limb, and each of Wolfboy’s body hairs has been painstakingly hand carved. It’s meticulously and beautifully done, and there is something so intimate about the fact that the reader can literally see the loops and whorls of Harkness’ thumbprint where he pressed the clay flat to make each lily pad.

And yet, as mind-bending as this artwork is, it still—as all the best children’s illustrations do—serves the primary function of supporting and expanding the story. This is a story that children will want to hear and act out over and over. It’s deeply theatrical, inviting participation through its repetition and pattern, and there are layers of treats for future readings (like a hide-and-seek element with bunnies hidden throughout the spreads). The sweet ending cancels out the intentionally built-up fear (orchestrated and framed, page by page, with such mastery), making the end product a delightful journey for all involved, not to mention a total banquet on which the eyes can feast. Hope you’re as hungry as Wolfboy.

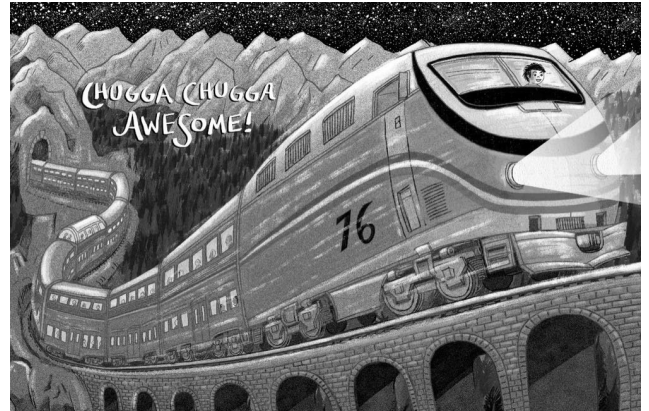
**Reviewed by Becca Worthington**

REVIEW

# On the Go Awesome

*On the Go Awesome.* By Lisl H. Detlefsen, ill. by Robert Neubecker. ISBN 1984852342. Knopf, 2020.

Every children's librarian and early childhood educator has a transportation storytime at the ready. Kids get super excited at such a young age about vehicles with their wheels going round and their horns going beep, and all the fast and slow excitement that entails. And there is no shortage of excellent picture books to use on this topic, but let me add a stellar one to your arsenal with *On the Go Awesome*.



Trains are cool, right? Watching trains is even cooler. And riding on a train is super-duper-mega-cool. But what about being a solo child allowed to conduct a train through a mountain pass at high speeds? I'd call that Chugga Chugga Awesome. With the opening pages, the pattern is set for introducing a variety of vehicles in their natural habitat and then leveling up by putting the child behind the wheel (or stern or cockpit). Want to operate an excavator at a construction site? Drive a subway underneath the bustling city streets? Captain a cruise ship across a vast and endless sea? Blast off to outer space on a rocket? This book has you covered. When you get to the part where the child hero gets to jump a monster truck over a gigantic row of cars in a single crushingly awesome maneuver, get ready for your whole room of preschoolers to collectively lose their adorably overexcited minds.

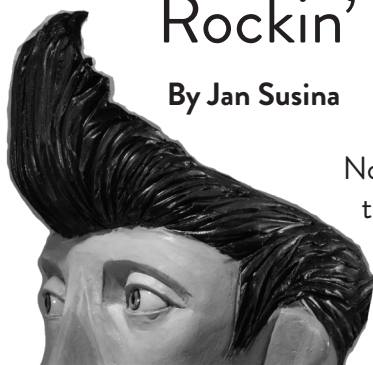
The loose plot is simple, engaging, and incredibly fun, with a lot of built-in suspense for what each mega-page will reveal, and the illustrator does not disappoint with exciting angles, bright colors, and boldly colored text. Plus, the artwork is very intentional about inclusivity and diversity in the cityscapes and transit pages (she says while nodding winkingly at the female foremen and pilots; doffing her cap at the wide range of skin colors used; and applauding the ambiguous ethnicity of the main character). And because the book is so mega-super-huge in its awesomeness, the quiet and unassuming ending that celebrates how travel is at its most awesome with family packs quite the little punchline.

**Reviewed by Becca Worthington**



# Rockin' in the South with Elvis Presley

By Jan Susina



Nothing is more Southern than Elvis Presley. His music and musical performance changed American music. By combining rhythm and blues and country and folk, musicians such as Elvis, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Jerry Lee Lewis forged the new musical genre embraced by teenagers and loathed by adults: rock 'n' roll. Jonah Winter's *Elvis Is King!* (Schwartz & Wade, 2019) and Mark Alan Stamaty's *Shake, Rattle & Turn That Noise Down: How Elvis Shook Up Music, Me and Mom* (Knopf, 2010) are two picture books that celebrate how Elvis transformed American music and how his music has affected listeners on a personal level. Using different but clever illustrations, both of these picture books introduce Elvis and his music to younger readers in a lively and entertaining manner showing how he became the king of rock 'n' roll.

Jonah Winter's *Elvis Is King!* takes a more biographical approach to Elvis and is told through a series of brief episodes of his life presented as prose poems. From his humble birth in Tupelo, Mississippi, the recording of his first real record, "That's All Right," at age nineteen at Sun Records in Memphis to his hip shaking performances on *Ed Sullivan Show* in 1956, Elvis's life is very much a rags-to-riches story, like a modern day Horatio Alger's tale, in which an eleven-year-old boy receives a guitar purchased by his mother at hardware store and by age twenty-one he has made his first #1 record, "Heartbreak Hotel." Winter explains that much of Elvis's success was the result of his being white during a period of discrimination of African Americans and that Sam Philips found in Elvis the singer he was seeking: a white musician who could play "black music" to white teenagers. Winter concludes the picture book with his attempt to classify the music that Elvis created, suggesting that "it's black music sung by a Southern white man" and that is "more than the sum of its parts."

Chris Sickels, the illustrator for *Elvis Is King!*, provides compelling artwork in the form of photographs of three-dimensional dioramas constructed of ordinary wire, fabric, wood, and found objects. The picture book also features Sickels's scratch-built figures that help bring Elvis's story

to life. Their simple, handmade style conforms with Elvis's humble upbringing.

Mark Alan Stamaty's *Shake, Rattle & Turn That Noise Down!* is an autobiographical memoir of how Elvis and his music transformed the life of a boy growing up in Brooklyn. Stamos is cartoonist, best known for his political comic strip, *Washington*, and as the political cartoonist for *Time* magazine. His picture book is presented in comic strip form and recounts his discover of Elvis Presley on the radio, which his parents gave him for his eighth birthday. Like so many other adults of the 1950s, Stamaty's parents preferred easy listening music and were horrified by the wailing of Elvis and convinced themselves that Elvis was only a passing fad. But like so many young people, Stamaty was hooked. His mother reluctantly allowed him to listen to Elvis on the radio but refused him to purchase and play any of his records in the house. But even she enjoyed "Love Me Tender" and reluctantly allowed him to purchase the single record, not realizing that its B-side was the more fast-paced "Any Way That You Want Me." After that jarring experience of hearing Elvis on record, his parents relented and Stamaty allowed him to purchase other Elvis records, which lead him to more rock 'n' roll music.

Stamaty sang along to his records and learned to imitate Elvis's husky Southern accent and eventually begin combing his hair in an Elvis-style pompadour, which made him popular in school. He eventually asked to perform as Elvis in a skit at the annual Cub Scout dinner, which wowed the audience and earned him the respect of his parents. The picture book concludes with some charming photos of the fourth grade Stamaty in his role as Elvis. In an afterword, Stamaty admits that his love of Elvis has never abated, and he often performed Elvis at parties as an adult, which culminated when he was asked to perform Elvis for President Bill Clinton—another serious Elvis fan-- at an informal White House gathering. Like the life of Elvis Presley, this picture book's humor shows the transforming power of music to move people to strange and unexpected places.

**Jan Susina** teaches courses in Children's and Young Adult Literature courses in the English Department at Illinois State University. As any Elvis fan, he has made the pilgrimage to Graceland.

# Alan Gratz Brings History Alive from the Blue Ridge Parkway

By Sarah Minslow

Southern children's book author Alan Gratz lives and writes from his home nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Asheville, North Carolina. Growing up in Knoxville, Tennessee, Gratz was not particularly interested in history or hardship and admits his life was carefree, though particularly humid in summer. He always had a passion for reading books and writing stories.

Since graduating from the University of Tennessee with degrees in Creative Writing and English Education, Gratz has written seventeen novels for young readers and become a New York Times #1 best-selling author. His novels feature young protagonist who must confront immense challenges, mostly during major historical events, including the Holocaust, 9/11, and the Civil War. The novels *Refugee*, *Allies*, and *Code of Honor* offer diverse perspectives about contemporary issues like the refugee crisis, discrimination against Muslim-Americans following 9/11, and international collaboration to combat extremist hate groups.



While young readers will learn important facts and details about American and global history (which makes these books excellent additions to the middle school curriculum), Gratz's writing style encourages full engagement with likeable, complex, agentic young characters. In these gripping novels, readers experience history through the eyes of young people who are living it and who are faced with morally complex decisions that may result in death, their own or others. Short chapters, parallel narratives, and cliffhangers provide motivation for even reluctant readers to continue the story.

Borrowing from his Southern roots, Gratz's series of *Horatio Wilkes Mysteries* is set in Tennessee. Gratz borrows names from Shakespearian characters in these contemporary retellings. The first book, *Something Rotten*, is a modern twist on Hamlet, but the polluted river mystery is based on the real rotten smell of the paper mill just west of Asheville in the small town of Canton. The series features other traditions of the South, such as a Scottish Highlands Fair, in his retelling of Macbeth in *Something Wicked*.

Alan Gratz's novels are sure to please readers young and old, and while they allow readers to travel through time and space, Gratz's Southern upbringing has provided him with the imagination and writing skills to travel around the globe talking to young people about his stories. Pretty awesome for a good ole Southern boy! To learn more about Gratz and his novels, visit him online at [www.alangratz.com](http://www.alangratz.com)

A native of South Carolina, **Sarah Minslow** is now an assistant professor of children's and young adult literature at California State University, Los Angeles.

# An Appreciation of Kwame Mbalia's *The Tristan Strong Trilogy*

By Katie Baker

As a lover of both mythology and middle-grade fantasy, I was drawn to Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* novels, which reimagines Greek mythology through the eyes of an American boy who discovers he has unique ties to the gods of Ancient Greece. Riordan has four other connected series retelling the stories of ancient mythologies, from Roman to Egyptian and Norse, and his books are wildly popular across age ranges. In 2018, Riordan used his platform to launch an imprint at Disney-Hyperion publishing called Rick Riordan Presents, which aims to publish books by middle grade authors from cultures and backgrounds that are often overlooked by mainstream publishers. The imprint creates a space for authors to tell stories inspired by the mythology and folklore of their own heritage, such as the West African and African American mythologies of Kwame Mbalia's *Tristan Strong Trilogy*.

The *Tristan Strong Trilogy* centers around a 13-year-old boy from Chicago who loses his best friend in a terrible accident and is sent to live at his grandparents' farm in Alabama to heal from his grief. The Strong family stories are central to the narrative, including his father and grandfather's boxing legacies and his grandmother's proclivity for relaying old folk tales passed down through the generations. Once in the Deep South, these stories come to life. Tristan discovers a magical realm called Alke, full of legendary characters such as John Henry, Anansi the trickster god, and Brer Rabbit.

In the first book of the trilogy, *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky* (Rick Riordan Presents, 2019), a mysterious force is tearing Alke apart and Tristan must learn to face his foes as well as his own grief in order to protect his new friends. Much of the book is an allegory for slavery and the generational trauma of slavery, which means it can be a great resource for middle grade students to gain a deeper understanding about this shameful part of American history that is often glossed over in the curriculum. While the symbolism is explicit at times, with villains resembling shackles or ships made out of bones, much of it is tenuous and may be difficult for young readers to grasp without some guided discussion. On the other hand, the tenuous nature of the allegory as well as the fantasy and comedic elements allow for enough space from the elements of horror inherent in a narrative about slavery that younger readers won't feel overwhelmed by them.

The second book, *Tristan Strong Destroys the World* (Rick Riordan Presents, 2020), maintains connections with Alke and the original narrative but feels much more rooted in this world. As Tristan copes with events in Alke in addition to grief over his friend's death, readers learn about trauma, both individual and generational. This may be many readers' first introduction to the concept of trauma, even for some who have first-hand experience with it. By naming trauma and struggling to contend with it while still fighting to save his friends, Tristan's character is ultimately a source of empowerment for young readers also dealing with the effects of loss and grief. While the symbolism can tend toward didactic at times, the complexity of the narrative and familiar but well-rounded characters make it a worthwhile read.

The third installment, *Tristan Strong Keeps Punching*, is scheduled for release in Fall of 2021 and I'm excited to reenter the world of Alke and see Tristan take on enemies of Alke once more as he becomes a master storyteller and fights alongside the African gods and folktale characters alike. This series is not only a great learning tool, but it is wildly creative, exciting, and emotional. While I recommend these books to middle grade fantasy and mythology lovers, I should also mention that each book is at least 400 pages and might be better suited for voracious readers than readers who are easily overwhelmed or may have short attention spans. For readers who enjoy the lengthier, expansive, detailed fantasy books, though, this series is a perfect fit.



**Katie Baker** is a graduate student and teaching assistant at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She is pursuing a MA in English with a concentration in Children's Literature and is Secretary of the Children's Literature Graduate Organization. She is primarily interested in middle grade gothic fantasy books and multicultural children's literature and looks forward to teaching these subjects in the future.

# Historical Mysteries from The South—An Interview with Susan Diamond Riley

By Dina Schiff Massachi

Susan Diamond Riley writes middle-grade historical fiction mysteries set primarily in the Carolina Lowcountry. Her novels, *The Sea Island's Secret* (University of South Carolina Press, 2019) and *The Sea Turtle's Curse* (Koehler Books, 2020) are the first two books in the Delta & Jax Mystery series, with a third book currently in the works. Mrs. Riley was kind enough to share her time with *RISE* in order to help us learn a little more about writing historical mysteries, her southern inspirations, and where—or perhaps a better word is when—Delta and Jax are going next.

**I'm very excited about your newest Delta and Jax book, *The Sea Turtle's Curse*. Can you tell us a little about it?**

*The Sea Turtle's Curse* follows the continuing adventures of tween siblings Delta and Jax Wells. In this book, the duo become disaster-magnets after they discover an ancient carving of a sea turtle on the beach of Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. Now they must uncover forgotten American history and learn the importance of passing on stories as they travel throughout the Carolina Lowcountry—and through time itself—in a race to break the turtle's curse before a hurricane destroys their island home!

**This isn't your first Delta and Jax book. *The Sea Island's Secret* came first. Do they need to be read in order?**

In the first Delta & Jax Mystery, *The Sea Island's Secret*, the kids find a human skeleton and a mysterious message-in-a-bottle in the salt marsh, sending them on a hunt for a long-forgotten treasure from the time of the American Civil War. Each book involves a stand-alone mystery that is resolved by the end of the final chapter. Even so, though, the books are written chronologically and the overarching story of the siblings' lives will make better sense to readers who read them in order. For example, Delta and Jax deal more with their sibling relationship in the first book. By book two, *The Sea Turtle's Curse*, they are each coming to understand themselves and their own place in our world. Plus, they've made a new friend—Darius—in this new book. Darius's family will continue to play a substantial role in upcoming adventures as readers learn more about the Gullah culture that still plays such a vital role in Lowcountry society. The Gullah people, by the way, are descendants of the freed slaves who once worked on plantations in the Lowcountry.

**Darius sounds fascinating! I imagine that some people have never heard about Gullah culture. How do you decide what historical elements to include? How do you decide what parts to fictionalize, and how do you make that fictionalization clear to your readers?**

I am continuously amazed by the significant role that the Carolina Lowcountry played in our country's history, and by how much of that history has been forgotten. For example, did you know that, for more than twenty years, the Spanish capitol of our entire continent stood on the grounds of what is now Parris Island Marine Recruiting Station, just across Port Royal Sound from Hilton Head Island? *The Sea Turtle's*

Curse sees Delta and Jax actually “visiting” the Spanish Santa Elena Colony in the late 1500’s, as well as witnessing some of the Native Americans that lived in the region during that time.

My goal is to highlight some of these forgotten moments in history, found through my own research and exploration of the American South, and present them in a way that readers young and old will find entertaining and relevant to our world today. Of course, I sometimes need to embellish or fictionalize some of the historical facts and events in my books. For clarification, though, each Delta & Jax Mystery includes a “Fact or Fiction?” section at the end that distinguishes the real history from my own storytelling.

*The Sea Island’s Secret* explores another one of these forgotten moments in our country’s past, the Battle of Port Royal, which happened on the now-calm waters right off the coast of modern-day Hilton Head Island during the Civil War. This battle changed the course of the war for the North but, more importantly, allowed the island to be one of the first places in the South where slaves were freed. These freed people even began their own self-governed town, Mitchelville, becoming the first freed slaves to do so. But that’s a story for another book!

**You currently live on Hilton Head, as do Delta’s and Jax’s grandparents. What about the island inspires you?**

I actually lived in Charlotte, North Carolina, when I wrote my first Delta & Jax Mystery set on Hilton Head Island. The research that I did writing that book convinced my husband and me that we wanted to make the island our full-time home. This part of the country is filled with hidden and forgotten history that, as a storyteller and history-lover, I feel is begging to be told! Besides the fascinating history, though, there is a distinct culture to the area in terms of setting (ocean waves crashing on the shore and live oaks dripping with wisps of Spanish moss), inhabitants (Gullah families who have called this island home for more than a century, new Northern transplants anxious for milder temperatures, and birds and sea life everywhere you look), and the food (fresh oyster roasts on the beach and buttery grits). The meandering path of creeks through the salt marsh is a perfect analogy for life in the Lowcountry—we’re not in such a hurry to get where we’re going, because we realize there is so much to see and appreciate along the way.

**There is a third book in the works. Can you tell us anything about it?**

Yes, I’m currently working on the third Delta & Jax book. This one will involve the Revolutionary War—a time when Hilton Head Island was fighting for American independence, yet its neighbor Daufuskie Island was loyal to the British crown. In a sense, that war was a civil war in our country, as well, pitting family members and friends against one another. I’m sure that Delta and Jax will learn a lot that relates to their modern world, and I hope that readers will take away a message of history-based hope for the future.

**Dina Massachi** teaches at UNC Charlotte’s English and American Studies departments and has a deep love for children’s literature.

# An Appreciative Look at Loretta Little Looks Back

By Janaka Lewis

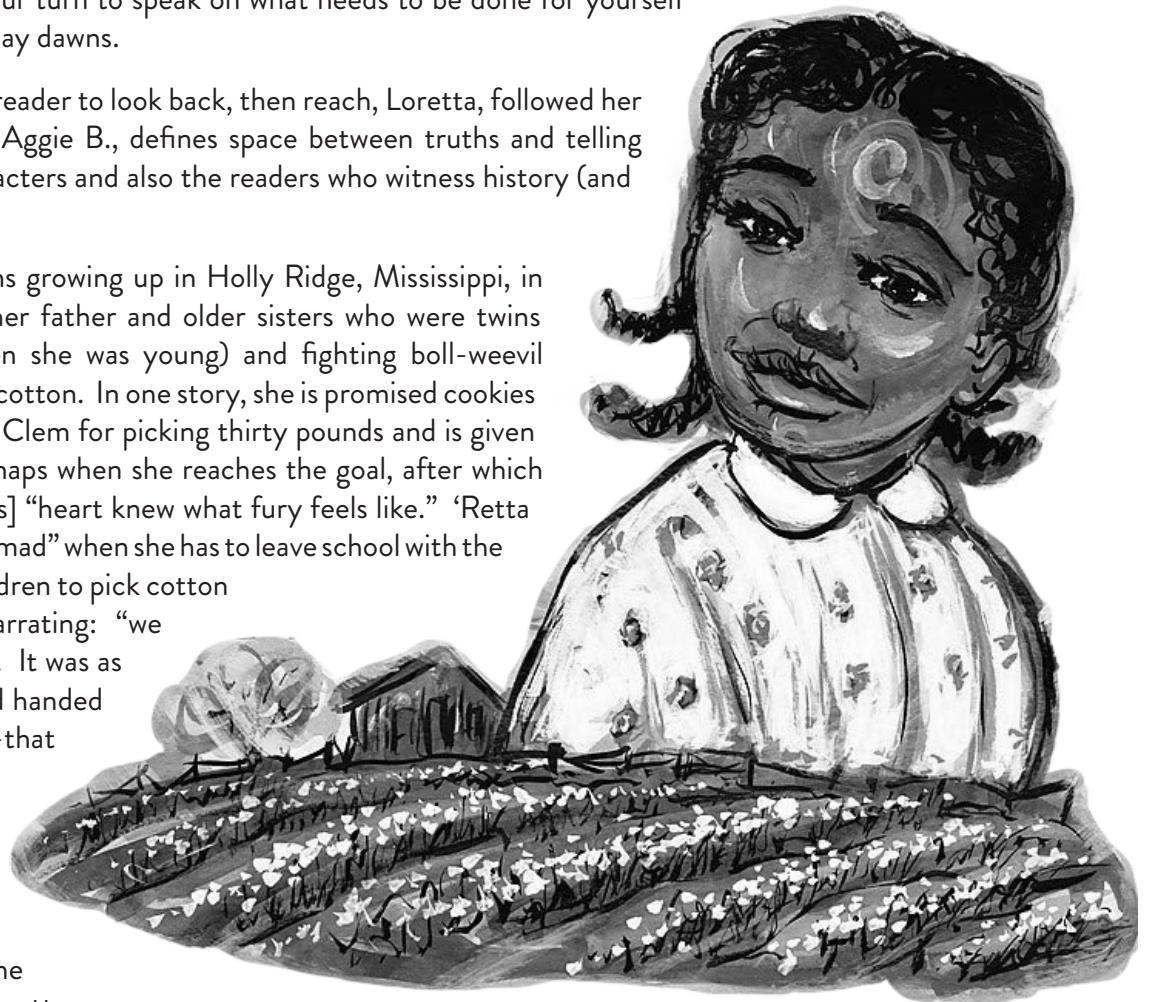
In *Loretta Little Looks Back: Three Voices Go Tell It* (Little, Brown & Co., 2020,) New York Times bestselling author Andrea Davis Pinkney uses a family of three generations to discuss the pride and resilience of a being Black in Mississippi that begins with sharecropping in the 1920s and endures even in spite of loss, illness, and mistreatment by property owners. From the voice of Loretta Little, the protagonist who tells her story in poetry and prose, to the connections with her niece “Aggie B.” who refuses to fit in restrictions of girlhood or “proper” womanhood, the text illustrates the significance of familial bonds and finding one’s voice.

The introductory monologue “Dawn” reads, “Enter, Loretta./She is strong. She is bright. Booming truths, she is.” . . . “Loretta knows—don’t look down when you’re looking back./ And don’t never back down when it’s time to meet memories/ face-on.” Loretta is: “read./Prepared to tell it,” and she does. In prose, Loretta recounts: “Some say, this is what they call oration. I call it truth-talking. Standing up to speak on what-all I remember. Recollecting,” but she is the center of her narratives, which she calls “go-tell-its”:

I look back first. Then here come more Littles. Each of us with our own go-tell-it, sharing how it was. Where our feet walked. What-all happened. And the road we’re going on, come tomorrow. After we’re through, it’ll be your turn to speak on what needs to be done for yourself and others when a new day dawns.

By encouraging the reader to look back, then reach, Loretta, followed her brother Roly and niece Aggie B., defines space between truths and telling that empowers the characters and also the readers who witness history (and herstory) with them.

Loretta’s story begins growing up in Holly Ridge, Mississippi, in September 1927, with her father and older sisters who were twins (their mother died when she was young) and fighting boll-weevil beetles to pick the most cotton. In one story, she is promised cookies by the property’s owner Clem for picking thirty pounds and is given stale and moldy gingersnaps when she reaches the goal, after which Pinkney writes [Loretta’s] “heart knew what fury feels like.” ‘Retta also becomes “crabgrass mad” when she has to leave school with the other sharecropping children to pick cotton full time in the fields, narrating: “we bit hard into our lessons. It was as if Miss Teacher Lady had handed out a single ear of corn—that all fifty-and-something of us had to share—and told us to finish off every golden kernel.” Education is the goal to which she ultimately aspires and Loretta even wishes in church “to be able to keep up with book-learning and getting educated.” From a child’s eye, such a simple wish reveals the inequity of the sharecropping system and what it limited for even the youngest family members.



As the story continues, the sisters find a “Night-Deep” baby left behind by a mother who couldn’t raise him, which represented hope on “troubled soil.” Rollins, or Roly, named for their mother’s surname, is slow and deliberate, even as he grows up to choose a wife who eventually leaves for more opportunities in northern cities (the story of the Great Migration) and who leaves their daughter behind for Roly and Loretta to help raise. Although Roly’s story is the second narrative, it is Aggie’s from 1962-1968 that concludes the trilogy of the family.

The monologue poem “New Day” reads, “This girl, her brother’s child,/like a daughter to Loretta, is cut from the same/spirited cloth” . . . “There’s something to be said for legacy.” Aggie is self-described “bold” (the B. in her middle name), bears witness, and speaks her mind. In her narrative, she also states that she is grateful for the suffering she endured. Her narrative also represents the histories of activism in Mississippi, as Aggie describes attending a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) rally and hearing James Forman speak about the constitutional right of then-called “Colored” people to vote. Aggie, Loretta, and another White woman volunteer to go register and help register to vote, as Pa Rollins worries about their safety.

It is both ‘Retta and Aggie that convince Roly that “women got our own minds to make” as he surrenders. When they travel to Indianola, Mississippi, in 1962, they wait for hours and Aggie witnesses the impossible literacy tests, reading the Mississippi State Constitution and tricky instructions. Retta takes a test with her to study and learns that the test will always be set up as impossible. Aggie does not back down, however, and ‘Retta does not either. They went twice more to Indianola, when Retta continues to fail the test, and the sixth time she passes that test and becomes one of the first and only Colored women in the county to register to vote.

The family then has to save money to pay the poll tax, and Aggie promised to “help as many Colored citizens as possible do whatever it took to cast their votes into America’s ballot box.” At twelve, Aggie joins SNCC to register voters and witnesses violence perpetrated by hate groups and police in their work. She is a victim of violence herself and is kept going by Black athletic heroes (in the Olympic triumphs of Cassius Clay and Wilma Rudolph) and gospel songs. Through her voice, we see the founding of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), their own political party because they were excluded from the Mississippi Democratic Party. Aggie is seated at the Democratic National Convention in August 1964 and August 1968 as a delegate with Miss Fannie Lou Hamer, too young to vote but old enough to tell the story.

When the three voices look back together, they see the new day on the horizon, as Aggie B. says “On freedom/On hope./On the vote.” Together, they tell truths and, as they conclude, “go do.” Theirs are imaginary narratives based on very real events, including the struggle to the vote and the work of the MFDP. In poems and monologues set from 1927 to 1968, Pinkney celebrates the strength of this family, Black history, and the possibilities in an honest future. Illustrated by Brian Pinkney and ending with photographs of families who were sharecroppers but so much more, this book shows what hopes for equality, empowerment, and as Andrea Pinkney writes, a “brighter tomorrow” looks like. As a text that can be read by advanced elementary or as a family in vignettes and monologues, Loretta Little Looks Back tells a story of what happens when Black women and girls claim and use their voices and the continuing need for revealing powerful truths in American lives.

**Janaka Lewis** is an associate professor of English at UNC Charlotte where she also serves as the Director of the Women’s and Gender Studies Program.

# For Norton Juster, Who Showed Us the Way

By Jan Susina

With the recent death of Norton Juster at age ninety-two, now is an appropriate time to look back and remember the author of *The Phantom Tollbooth* and consider what a remarkable children's book that he wrote. *The Phantom Tollbooth*, first published in 1961, is one of the few contemporary children's books that in terms of creativity is equal to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Like the *Alice* books or the *Oz* books, *The Phantom Tollbooth* is an outstanding children's fantasy novel that can be read and re-read with increasing pleasure. Also like other classics of children's literature, *The Phantom Tollbooth* only seems to improve with age.

*The Phantom Tollbooth*, like Carroll's two *Alice* books, is overflowing with wordplay, puns, and nonsense. Structurally it resembles Baum's *Oz*: it is a highly whimsical road trip that threads its way through a series of fantastical landscapes filled with eccentric and peculiar characters. Along the way, Milo is introduced to the Spelling Bee who can spell any word, Faintly Macabre who formerly served as the "Official Which" as opposed to a witch and would advise of the most appropriate and fitting of words to use, and Officer Short Shrift, a policeman who renders the swift verdicts before investigations. My favorite of Juster's unconventional characters is the ordinary man. He simultaneously promotes himself as the world's smallest giant, the world's biggest dwarf, the world's thinnest fat man, and the world's fattest thin man so that he can hold four positions at once, as Jules Feiffer's illustrations reveal.

*The Phantom Tollbooth* is the quirky adventure of Milo, a young boy who is bored with everything, since no one had taken the time explain the value or pleasure of seeking knowledge. Milo is not just bored, but unhappy and feels the world is a vast empty space, with nothing to see, nothing to do, and nowhere to go. Milo has steadfast companions who accompany him on his journey. Tock, a faithful watchdog who has a giant clock attached to this body who hates to see anyone wasting time. The other is the dislikeable Humbug, who frequently directs Milo in the wrong direction. The group visit various parts of the Kingdom of Wisdom in Milo's electric car. Juster was clearly a man ahead of his time. Milo learns the Kingdom of Wisdom has been thrown into chaos due the conflict between its two rulers. King Azaz, the Unbridged rules Dictionopolis, the capital of words. His brother, the Mathemagician who rules Digitopolis, the capital of numbers. In the midst of their argument whether words or numbers are superior, the two rulers have exiled the Princess Rhyme and Reason to the Castle in the Air.

During his adventures, Milo learns of the beauty of mathematics and the complexity and ambiguity of language. Overcoming various hazards to clear thinking and action, Milo is able to encourage Rhyme and Reason to return to the Kingdom of Why. With their return, the citizens of the Kingdom of Wisdom can avoid becoming like the inhabitants of the cities of Reality and Illusion. Rhyme and Reason provide Milo and readers with valuable parting advice. Making mistakes is fine as long as you learn from them. It is not the accumulation of facts that important, but how you use your knowledge. Everything we learn has a purpose. Whatever we do with knowledge potentially affects everyone else. Milo returns from his adventure transformed and realizing there is so much to do in life.

As marvelous as *The Phantom Tollbooth* is as a children's book, the process of how it was written and illustrated is a tale in itself. Juster studied to become an architect. One of his teachers and mentor was Lewis Mumford, the leading authority on urban planning and the architecture critic for *The New Yorker*. With Mumford's aid, Juster was awarded a Fulbright Award to study civic design at the School of Architecture at the University of Liverpool. Afterward he completed his military service as a Civil Engineer. Returning to New York City, he began working for a small architectural firm. Unfulfilled with his job, he applied for and received a \$5000 Ford Foundation Grant in 1960 to write a children's book about urban planning and design. A chance conversation with a young boy in a restaurant about "What is the biggest number there is?" caused him to shift gears. Instead, he began writing a story about a child who asked too many questions.



Even more remarkable was that Juster's neighbor two flights up in his apartment just happened to be the young cartoonist Jules Feiffer. Feiffer has recently gained success with this adult comic strip published in the *Village Voice*. The two became friends and eventually moved to a larger duplex apartment shared with a third friend, with Juster occupying the top floor. Curious about Juster's constant late-night pacing, Feiffer visited Juster's apartment. Feiffer learned that his friend had decided against writing a book about urban planning for children, but a children's fantasy instead. After reading drafts of portions from *The Phantom Tollbooth*, Feiffer volunteered to draw the illustrations.

It was a fortunate series of events that brought the first-time children's author and first-time children's book illustrator together. The art director who designed the initial layouts for the illustrations was Edward Gorey, but the layouts seemed too confusing to Juster who rejected them and redesigned the placement of the text and illustrations on his own.

Both Juster and Feiffer would continue to have careers in children's literature. Juster wrote *Alberic the Wise and Other Journeys* (1965), which is a companion volume to *The Phantom Tollbooth* with journeys in search of wisdom, *Otter Nonsense* (1982) illustrated by Eric Carle, *The Hello, Goodbye Window* (2005) illustrated by Chris Raschka, which was awarded the Caldecott Award, and *The Odious Ogre* (2010), which reunited him with Feiffer as the illustrator. Juster also wrote and provided the illustrations for his witty *The Dot and the Line: A Romance in Lower Mathematics* (1963), which is intended for adults.

*The Phantom Tollbooth* remains both Juster's and Feiffer's crowning achievement in children's literature. Feiffer's playful black-and-white illustrations are as much an essential part of the book as John Tenniel's illustrations are for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. It is remarkable that Norton was unfamiliar with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* until after he completed his *The Phantom Tollbooth* given the similarities between the two books. As odd as that seems, Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, the two great nonsense poets of the nineteenth century, apparently never read each other's work.

The recognition and appreciation of *The Phantom Tollbooth* had a slow start with many initial reviews dismissing it or suggesting the book was a bit too challenging for younger readers. But a positive review by Emily Maxwell in *The New Yorker* helped to change attitudes and sales for *The Phantom Tollbooth*. Maxwell called it an "odd, very fine book" and compared it to the Alice books, James Thurber's fantasies, and even John Bunyan's *A Pilgrim's Progress* in that it was "concerned with the awakening of lazy mind."

While *The Phantom Tollbooth* did not garner any major children's literature awards when it was published, like E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, over time it has become recognized as a significant and beloved contribution to children's literature having sold over three million copies in the United States. Chuck Jones produced a live action/animated film adaptation of *The Phantom Tollbooth* released in 1970, but the film was a disappointment to Juster and many of his readers. Admirers include Maurice Sendak, Diana Wynne Jones, Philip Pullman, and Michael Chabon,

I think the best way to honor and remember Norton Juster is to read or re-read *The Phantom Tollbooth*. It makes a good gift for a slightly bored middle schooler, or a reluctant reader. The edition I would recommend is *The Annotated Phantom Tollbooth* (2011) with a splendid introduction and detailed annotations by the children's literature scholar Leonard Marcus.

**Jan Susina** teaches courses in Children's Literature and Young Adult Literature in the English Department at Illinois State University. He still owns his slightly battered and heavily read copy of *The Phantom Tollbooth* from his childhood.

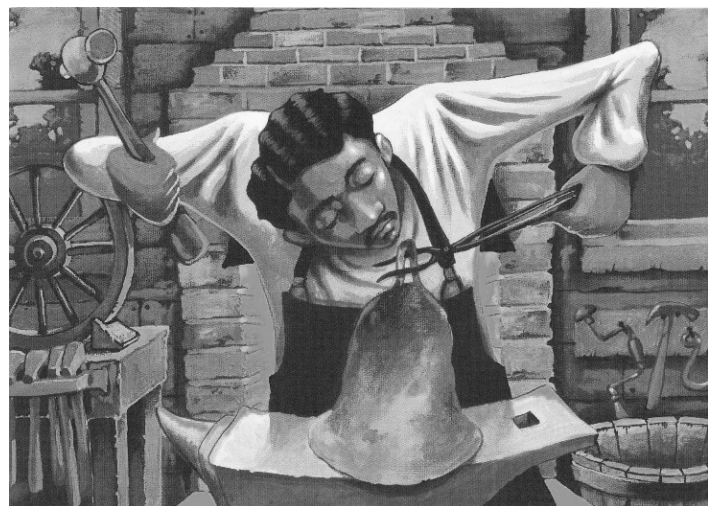
# Surviving and Thriving in the American South: Stories about the African American Experience

By Abby Moore

The history of our country is riddled with injustice and controversy. It is also filled with stories of survival and perseverance. We continue to fight the injustices and biases that have persisted into the 21st Century in many ways. We protest and educate and we tell stories. Some of the stories discussed in this article focus on the injustices experienced by people of color in the American South. They do not sugar coat the inhumane treatment of African Americans. We learn more about slavery, and sharecropping, and the Jim Crow south as we read. We also learn about lasting family traditions, the ties that bind us to land and to communities, and achievements fought for, and won, by the people who were enslaved and persecuted against. Illustrations, spare prose, and literary devices make these stories accessible to children, however, the content does not shy away from the very real violence and fear that was a reality in the lives of too many people in the American South.

Loretta, Roly, and Aggie B. take turns telling their stories in *Loretta Little Looks Back: Three Voices go Tell It*, written by Andrea Davis Pinkney and illustrated by Brian Pinkney. Their story starts in 1927 with Loretta, who is “crabgrass mad,” because she has to quit school to work on Clem Parker’s farm with her family. Roly’s story, which starts in 1942, picks up just after the Little’s have purchased their farm. Owning their own land has improved the quality of their lives and their farm is thriving, however, jealousy over their successes poisons their land. Aggie B., “the B. stands for Bold”, takes over the story in 1962 just after she turns twelve. SNCC comes to Mississippi and Aggie B., young and bold, but doubtful, raises her hand for change. Pinkney’s characters speak via poems, first person narratives, and old spirituals. She paints a picture of Mississippi with metaphor: the river is “two muddy ribbons of water”, and alliteration: dandelions are “hot-hued pom-poms”. There is no denying their stories are fraught with injustice, fear, and doubt. However, by the end of this chapter book, Retta, Roly, and Aggie B, are determined to remember, to believe, and to reach. By doing so, they act for change.

In *Hammering for Freedom: The William Lewis Story* written by Rita Lorraine Hubbard and illustrated by John Holyfield, William “Bill” Lewis was born in 1810, enslaved, on a farm in Winchester, Tennessee. He learned to hammer and to fix broken things almost before he could walk. His dream was to free his family, but to do this he would have to leave the farm. Year after year he hammered and forged and planned. When he was 27, he struck a deal with his owner “to rent himself”: he would work day and night until he earned enough to free his family. Hubbard’s use of repetition and onomatopoeia, “Ding! Ching!”, captures the persistent sound of the hammer and symbolizes Lewis’s hard work and long hours. Hubbard uses personification: “the hammer sang”, and the “hot iron spat liquid”, to show the reader the very dangerous challenges Lewis was up against both in his shop and back on the farm. Holyfield’s illustrations almost always show Lewis in motion, standing before a fire and holding a hammer. His use of vibrant yellow, green, and pink, encourages the reader to have hope for Lewis and for his family. When Lewis frees his wife first so that any other children they have are born free, he’s not even close to being done. His hard work and his hammer will not stop until his dream of freeing his entire family becomes a reality.





In *Jump at the Sun: The True Life Tale of Unstoppable Storycatcher Zora Neale Hurston*, written by Alicia D. Williams and illustrated by Jacqueline Alcantara, Zora first hears the tales of Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox in Eatonville, Florida. The stories mesmerize her and she starts telling her own tales. Some folks in Eatonville said that storytelling was “telling lies,” but Zora’s mother encouraged her to keep telling her stories, to “jump at the sun,” and she does. When her mother dies and she is sent to boarding school away from her beloved Eatonville, Zora must learn to fend for herself. Too soon she is forced to leave

school. She has to let go of her stories in order to work. For twelve years Zora is miserable, but she remembers her mother’s advice and she starts telling her stories again. She keeps jumping at the sun: writing, collecting, and telling stories along the way. Williams gives the sun a voice in this story and Zora heeds it’s advice. The illustrations reveal a Zora Neale Hurston who is curious and confident; determined to overcome the challenges and injustices she faces on her journey. When, after twenty-two years, Zora returns to Eatonville, the town and its people recognize her right away. She’s come home, but she hasn’t stopped jumping at the sun.

The stories discussed in this article are set in the south. Unsurprisingly, an overarching theme in all three stories is the injustices African Americans faced in the south during slavery and segregation. Other themes that sing out in these stories are persistence and loyalty, family traditions and the power of home. The characters in these stories never give up. They are steadfast in their determination to better their lives. And they do.

**Abby Moore**, Education, Honors, and Global Engagement Librarian at UNC Charlotte, is a former English teacher and High School librarian.

# The Lonely Road to Self-Discovery in *The Lonely Heart of Maybelle Lane*

By Mikayla Marlow

Eleven-year-old Maybelle Lane records and collects sounds on her hand-held tape recorder as she adjusts to life in Davenport, Louisiana. She doesn't record just any sounds; she records the sounds that most people do not stop to listen for like the 'clunk-a-chunk-runk' of an old ice machine, or the whistling of a grasshopper rubbing its legs together. Maybelle is a young, female protagonist who suffers from panic attacks and feels all of her emotions deeply, making her extremely mature for her age. She's a well-behaved, reserved child who makes good grades in school, and therefore goes unnoticed by most people, just as the sounds she collects. However, she does not escape the attention from the school bullies who happen to live in her neighborhood. They make fun of her because her momma is unmarried and has dated both men and women. Maybelle bottles her feelings inside in order to not add extra stress to Momma's plate. When her momma has to work, Maybelle is mostly left alone with her thoughts and her sound collection, and sometimes even has to work through panic attacks on her own for fear of getting Momma fired if she calls for help.

Kate O'Shaughnessy's novel *The Lonely Heart of Maybelle Lane* (Knopf Books of Young Readers, 2020) begins in the summer when Momma is offered a contract to sing on a cruise ship for three weeks in the Bahamas. The news is bittersweet to Maybelle who will now have to prepare to spend the rest of the break in solitude without her mother's



protection and support. However, the opportunity can change a lot for her and Momma's circumstances, so Maybelle keeps her fears to herself. After all, it is her fault that they are in such a bad situation to begin with, she thinks. While she and Momma are driving to the store to help Momma pack for her trip, Maybelle hears a familiar laugh on the radio from the station's DJ. It's the same laugh as the one she has on a recording from an old voicemail—her daddy's laugh. This, she thinks, is the sound of her fate, so she saves up her money to buy a Grand Prix radio and listens to his show every morning, wondering who he might be.

As Maybelle learns about the father figure she always felt she needed, she is warned by Momma that he will only break her heart. She waits for Momma to leave before forming a plan to meet her daddy. Along the way, she finds unlikely help from a strict teacher, Mrs. Boggs, and one of the school bullies, Tommy O'Brien. The three set out on a journey to Nashville in Mrs. Boggs's RV to sign Maybelle up for a singing contest. Maybelle keeps a secret from her two travel mates that this singing contest is actually hosted by her daddy's radio show, and he will be one of the judges. Maybelle's excitement builds along the trip as she prepares to meet and introduce herself to her daddy for the first time. She wonders what he is like and whether or not her eye color and fascination with sounds came from him. She believes that meeting him will make up for the fact that her grandpa hates her because of his disapproval of Momma's lifestyle. Maybelle even believes that she will be able to convince him to fall back in love with Momma so she can finally have a 'real' family.

Throughout the journey, Maybelle faces a set of hardships. She suffers from another panic attack in front of Mrs. Boggs and Tommy when thinking about being on stage in front of thousands of people. She is tormented by the thoughts of her grandfather's disapproval, and she blames herself for accidentally revealing to him that her grandpa had been helping Momma afford a little house for the two of them. Now, she feels she and Momma live in a trailer park with no money because she did not keep silent when she should have. This causes her to question whether or not singing aloud in front of an audience is a good idea, and she fears that her daddy will be just as hateful and disappointed in her as her grandfather. Despite her fears, Maybelle cannot help but to hope that meeting her daddy will change her

life forever. When she learns about Tommy's abusive stepmom and Mrs. Boggs deceased husband, Maybelle realizes that she is not alone in her grief and struggles, but that everyone—even adults and bullies—has feelings that they sometimes keep bottled inside.



In an adventurous tale that allows readers laugh and cry, O'Shaughnessy's novel emphasizes the complex emotions that children experience, and the loneliness associated when battling grief and anxiety of any kind. Tommy acts up in school because he is too afraid to even go to sleep in his own home where he should be safe. Maybelle keeps to herself because she thinks she is unwanted and damaged. And though Maybelle goes on a drastic journey to change her fate, she finds that her life is already impacted by the people who choose to be in it. Having a daddy doesn't make Maybelle's

problems go away. She has to discover her own self-worth—it is not something any adult can hand to her. Maybelle also learns to care for others and not to make judgements about people who live differently than she lives. She learns empathy and self-confidence within the walls of Mrs. Boggs's slow-moving RV, and she shares her discoveries with readers as they follow her on her road trip. She records the true sounds of happiness, and though she stumbles and fails in her journey, Maybelle ends her summer with a better sense of who she is as she becomes more comfortable with sharing her emotions with the people who can help her. Her story encourages young readers to feel secure in their emotions and promises them that they are never truly alone.

**Mikayla Marlow** is a graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, pursuing her M.A. in English and Children's Literature. When she is not reading or studying, she enjoys being involved in children's music, theater, and cooking programs.

# A Knight's Code for a Southern Boy: Creating Change in Sara Pennypacker's Here in the Real World

By Jodie Slothower

“Sometimes Ware wished he lived back in the Middle Ages. Things were a lot simpler then, anyway, especially if you were a knight. Knights had a rule book – their code of chivalry that covered everything: *Thou shalt always do this, thou shalt never do that*. If you were a knight, you knew where you stood.” That is 11-year-old Ware trying to make sense of his life in a south Florida city where he feels like an outsider in Sara Pennypacker’s *Here in the Real World* (HarperCollins, 2020).

Quiet, precocious, and fascinated by knight lore, Ware struggles to understand his ambitious, hard-working, sports-enthusiast parents. The code of chivalry becomes a sort of shield during the summer as he adventures in an abandoned church, which he imagines to be his castle. He meets a younger girl, Jolene, who envisions the church yard as a garden spot to grow income-producing papaya. She has had too many bad experiences to embrace Ware’s vision, but together they figure out a way to thrive, rather than suffocate in the heat of Florida and their circumstances.

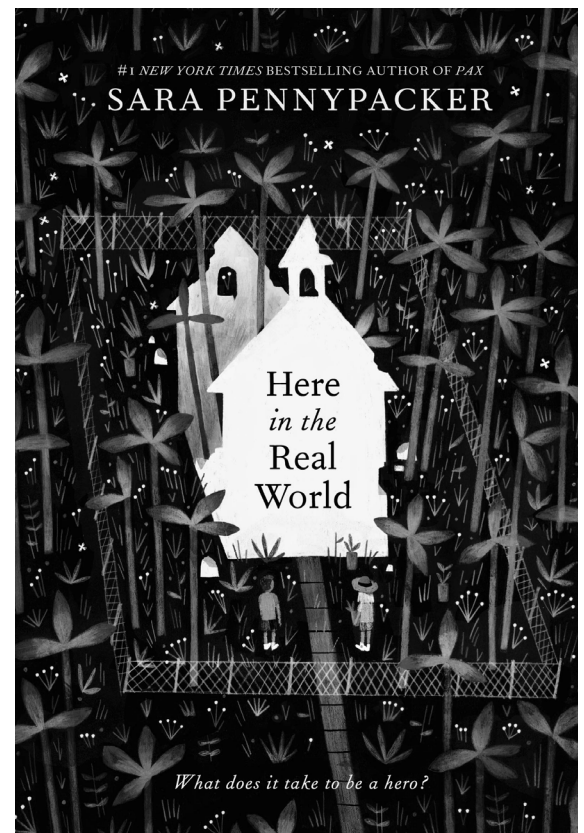
Ware had planned to spend the summer with his grandmother at her retirement village. When she breaks a hip, his parents need somewhere else to leave him. Ware feels old enough to be by himself, rather than have “Meaningful Social Interaction” that his outgoing mother prescribes. So for another summer, Ware is enrolled in the neighborhood Rec Center where he is now one of the oldest kids. His parents plan to work overtime all summer to earn enough money for down payment on the house they are renting.

While they love their son, Ware’s parents are distracted. They don’t realize that rather than enjoying the Rec Center Ware is a knight on a mission in the church building next to the center. The Baptist congregation could not keep up its mortgage so it abandoned the building. It reverted to a bank that slightly destroyed the church to fend off squatters. Ware and Jolene finds the remaining structure a perfect place to explore.

Fortunately, Pennypacker does not describe Ware’s code of chivalry as a male-dominated view of damsels in distress. As Ware befriends the younger Joelene, he tries to understand her situation and admires her courage.

Ware helps Jolene grow papayas in ChipNutz cans from discards she gets from a market run by Mrs. Sanchez. Ware discovers Mrs. Sanchez is also giving Jolene free lunches, which may be the only food she receives each day. Jolene lives above a nearby bar with her aunt. Ware eventually learns Jolene’s mother abandoned her and she now lives with an aunt who reluctantly cares for her.

Since the story takes place in a contemporary south Florida city, the state seeps into the narrative. Florida is a haven for senior citizens, like Ware’s grandmother, as well as people attracted to its golden possibilities for a solid



economic future, like his parents. Families, churches, small businesses, even the city government, try to succeed even as financial situations are precarious.

Ware wants life to be fair and people to be kind, but Jolene chides him, calling his hopeful perspective “Magic Fairness Land.” Ware hopes to change into an outgoing, sports-type son that his parents seem to want him to be. He decides he will be transformed in the abandoned church’s baptismal pool that Ware describes as a “giant get-born-again, penny-in-Coke, do-over tub.”

When 14-year-old Ashley rides her shiny bike to the church, Ware and Jolene are intrigued by her and her idea. She suggest landscaping and building a pond to attract migrating birds, including cranes. Ashley is a confident daughter of a city council member. Instead of her father’s interests in real estate and planning, she wants to save birds. Ashley may have a richer, more secure life than Ware and Jolene, but she also seems adrift. Eventually, all three kids move the earth and create a moat in the church’s former parking lot.

Very few adults are aware of what the kids are doing until the chapter book’s end. Kids solving problems on their own is a common stereotype in children’s books and films. Since this story has a veneer of reality, many adults’ behavior here seems sadly neglectful. Most of the few adults paying attention have little power to significantly help the kids. Only Ware’s uncle, a documentary filmmaker, understands his nephew. He suggests Ware create a short film about his summer. That film enlightens adults about the migrating birds while shedding light on the industriousness of the kids who then experience positive change.

*Here in the Real World* is somewhat real story told in a well-written, lyrical style. It’s filled with problems of money, old age, illness, neglect, bars, immigration, real estate, social services, and economic inequality. But it’s also about imagination and hope, the possibility of creating change for positive results, the power of art and creativity, and healing that can happen when people work together. It’s a story of children hoping ‘do-overs’ will save them. Instead, it’s their gumption and courage that propels them. Ware finds that his code of chivalry may be hundreds of years old, but it guides him to positively live in a world where he accepts himself and his strengths.

**Jodie Slothower** is a writer and digital marketing professional in central Illinois. She is a member of the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators. She is looking forward to when she can travel again to see her family in North Carolina.







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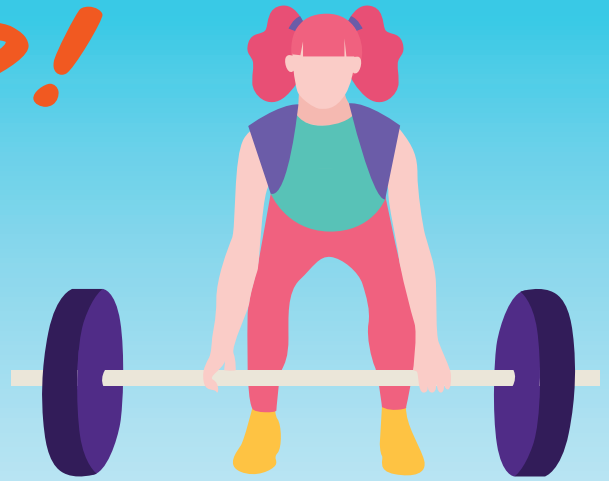
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