

The Coretta Scott King Book Award



As readers celebrate its fortieth anniversary, the ground-breaking award continues to promote understanding and cultural appreciation. **By Deborah Taylor**

This year the Coretta Scott King Book Award celebrates its fortieth anniversary. According to the American Library Association's Ethnic and Multicultural Information Exchange Round Table, the award recognizes "African American authors and illustrators for outstanding inspirational and educational contributions. The Coretta Scott King Book Award titles promote understanding and appreciation of the culture of all peoples and their contribution to the realization of the American

dream. The award is designed to commemorate the life and works of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and to honor Mrs. Coretta Scott King for her courage and determination to continue the work for peace and world brotherhood."

From the first award selection, *Martin Luther King Jr.: Man of Peace* by Lillie Patterson, to the 2008 award recipients, *Elijah of Buxton* by Christopher Paul Curtis and *Let It Shine* by Ashley Bryan, the Coretta Scott King Book Awards continue

to recognize the best in writing and artistic expression for all readers. At the same time, these books of high literary quality and artistic achievement are examples of universal themes that illuminate the humanity of all. The Coretta Scott King Book Awards have made and continue to make a significant contribution to the world of children's and young-adult literature. Many prominent writers and illustrators, including Jacqueline Woodson, Sharon G. Flake, Bryan Collier, and R. Gregory Christie, received their first major recognition through the awards and continue to create sparkling examples of the best in books for young readers. These awards provide an invaluable service as they bring attention to outstanding talent that broadens and enriches the entire field of children's and young-adult literature. In addition, the John Steptoe Award for New Talent is a focused way of seeking out and encouraging promising new writers and artists.

As the awards celebrate their fortieth year, it is time to take another look at the Coretta Scott King Award winners and Honor Books. Because the awards recognize authors and illustrators, the titles reflect a wide range of interests and grade levels. As valuable as these books are for celebrating African American history and culture, they can enrich the



Winner of the 2005 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award, *Ellington Was Not a Street* by Ntozake Shange, illustrated by Kadir Nelson, is a poetic tribute to the prominent figures that frequented the author's childhood home.

classroom curriculum at any time of the year. The following selection of titles reflects the range of fiction and nonfiction, literary forms, and storytelling styles in the complete list of award-winning books.

Preschool–Grade 2

Many of these selections for the earliest grades showcase the variety of music and artistic expression prevalent in the African American experience. Sharing the various types of music with students will heighten appreciation of the themes and subjects in these books. The art styles on display afford opportunities for students to experiment with cut-paper collage and paint.

Beautiful Blackbird. By Ashley Bryan. 2003. 40p. Atheneum, \$17.99 (9780689847318).

This Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award winner features exuberant and vibrant cut-paper images that enliven a retelling of a Zambian folktale celebrating inner beauty and diversity. When *Blackbird* is voted the most beautiful of the African birds, the other birds beg him to share his handsome coloring by painting them with black dots, lines, and arcs.

Jazzy Miz Mozetta. By Brenda C. Roberts. Illus. by Frank Morrison. 2004. 32p. Farrar, \$16.50 (9780374336745).

Exuberant, gray-haired Miz Mozetta, resplendent in a red dress and hat, heads out into her neighborhood one evening in search of dance partners young and old. By using angles as sharp as jazz notes, Morrison's lively illustrations in this John Steptoe Illustrator Award winner show that the joy of dancing never goes away.

Let It Shine: Three Favorite Spirituals. By Ashley Bryan. 2007. 48p. Atheneum, \$16.99 (9780689847325).

Bryan's colorful cut-paper

illustrations exude the warmth and lively nature of three African American spirituals, "This Little Light of Mine," "Oh, When the Saints Go Marching In," and "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," in this Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award winner.

My Family Plays Music. By Judy Cox. Illus. by Elbrite Brown. 2003. 32p. Holiday, \$17.95 (9780823415915).

Energetic and stylized pictures enhance the story of a family of musicians in this John Steptoe Illustrator Award winner. The multiracial family with its rainbow of skin tones is not only a lovely multicultural statement but also a vivid reflection of contemporary families and musical tastes.

Uptown. By Bryan Collier. 2000. 32p. Holt, \$17.95 (9780805057218); paper, \$7.95 (9780805073997).

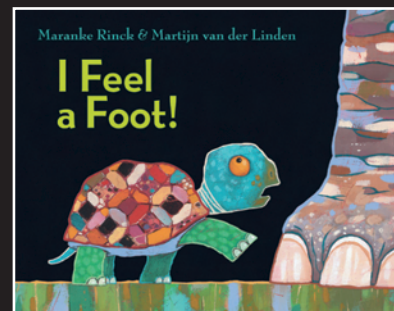
Watercolor and collage paintings evoke a boy's love for his Harlem neighborhood and its rows of brownstones, jazz clubs, barber shops, the Apollo Theater, and more in this Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award winner.

Grades 3–5

In addition to the beautiful writing and complementary illustrations, the books below provide road maps for making difficult concepts understandable to young readers. They present issues such as slavery, war, oppression, historical struggles, prejudice, and family disintegration in terms that are age and grade appropriate.

Brendan Buckley's Universe and Everything in It. By Sundee T. Frazier. 2007. 208p. Delacorte, \$14.99 (9780385734394); Yearling, paper, \$6.50 (9780440422068).

In this John Steptoe Author Award winner, Brendan Buckley has a burning desire to learn all he can about science. His love of rocks and minerals leads him to a mineral show, where he stumbles upon a family secret and



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I Feel a Foot!

Maranke Rinck

ILLUSTRATED BY
Martijn van der Linden

2008 Parents' Choice Gold Award

★“In this retelling of the familiar Sufi tale, a group of small animals meets a big new friend, one body part at a time. ... Rinck's narrative is crisp and direct, and economical enough to be tackled by beginning readers, and van der Linden's illustrations are superb.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*,
STARRED REVIEW

“Jewel-toned collage illustrations set against a flat black background create an eye-popping counterpoint to the text.”

—*Washington Post*

“Strike[s] just the right note between suspense and reassurance to offer a bedtime tale with a humorous twist.”

—*Shelf Awareness*

R“Will definitely tickle youngsters.”
—*The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*

“An ideal read-aloud.”
—*School Library Journal*

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a way to bring two different sides of his family together. The challenges faced by biracial children are gracefully explored in this warm family story.

Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan. By Mary Williams. Illus. by R. Gregory Christie. 2005. 40p. Lee & Low, \$17.95 (9781584302322).

Garang, an eight-year-old orphaned by the Sudanese civil war, joins thousands of others walking hundreds of miles to safety, eventually finding refuge in the United States. Christie's illustrations in this Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Book reflect both the difficulties and determination of Garang and his fellow travelers.

Ellington Was Not a Street. By Ntozake Shange. Illus. by Kadir Nelson. 2004. 40p. Simon & Schuster, \$17.99 (9780689828843).

In this Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award winner, Shange's free verse presents a historical movement as seen through the eyes of a child, experiencing the love and commitment of men determined to make a better world for all children. Nelson's dramatic paintings reflect the power and impact of this movement on the world and the intimate life of a little girl.

Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom. By Carole Boston Weatherford. Illus. by Kadir Nelson. 2006. 48p. Hyperion/Jump at the Sun, \$15.99 (9780786851751).

This dramatic presentation of

Harriet Tubman focuses on the inner strength that enabled her to face danger again and again to free her people from slavery. Weatherford reveals Tubman's spiritual nature and the connection she felt to God that fueled her life's mission. Nelson's bold, expressive illustrations complement the inspiring text in this Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award winner.

The Red Rose Box. By Brenda Woods. 2002. 144p. Putnam, \$16.99 (9780399237027); Puffin, paper, \$5.99 (9780142501511).

In this Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book, Leah and her younger sister Ruth are happy in quiet, segregated Sulphur, Louisiana, until they visit their aunt Olivia in California. Leah enjoys new opportunities and cannot imagine anyone choosing to live in the Jim Crow South. When tragedy forces the girls to live in Los Angeles permanently, Leah understands the family love that sustains them regardless of place.

Virgie Goes to School with Us Boys. By Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard. Illus. by E. B. Lewis. 2000. 32p. Simon & Schuster, \$17.99 (9780689800764); Aladdin, paper, \$7.99 (9780689877933).

In the years following the Civil War, Virgie is determined to attend school with her older brothers, even if it means walking seven miles to get there. In this Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Book, Lewis' illuminating watercolor paintings

dramatically depict the rural landscape and enhance the story.

The Way a Door Closes. By Hope Anita Smith. Illus. by Shane W. Evans. 2003. 64p. Holt, \$18.95 (9780805064773).

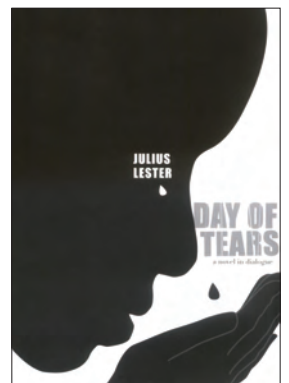
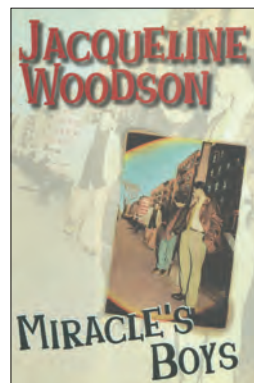
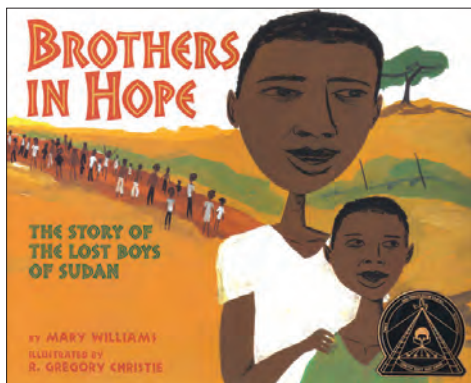
In this novel in verse that is a John Steptoe Author Award winner, C. J. copes with the pain that occurs when his father walks out on the family. The young man's attempt to make sense of the emotions that he and his family experience is heartfelt and provides understanding for so many in his circumstances. Also see the sequel, *Keeping the Night Watch* (Holt, 2008).

Grades 6–8

Middle school often finds readers exploring school, family, and personal issues with more complexity. These selected titles present themes both historical and contemporary that invite in-depth discussion about family decisions, problem solving, and setting goals.

Carver: A Life in Poems. By Marilyn Nelson. 2001. 112p. Front Street, \$16.95 (9781886910539).

The life of botanist and inventor George Washington Carver is explored in poetry that reflects both his courageous spirit and his gentle nature. This Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book begins as he is raised by white slave owners and follows his quest for an education and his work with students and farmers during his time at Tuskegee Institute.



A wealth of detailed information about the Coretta Scott King Book Award and the John Steptoe Award for New Talent, including a complete list of winners and honorees, is available on the American Library Association Web site at www.ala.org/csk.

Elijah of Buxton. By Christopher Paul Curtis. 2007. 352p. Scholastic, \$16.99 (9780439023443); paper, \$7.99 (9780439023450). Also available in an audio edition from Listening Library.

Elijah, the first free child born in a Canadian settlement of former slaves, finds his uneventful life disrupted when he attempts to locate the corrupt preacher who has stolen funds intended to purchase a family's freedom. For more on this Coretta Scott King Author Award winner, see "Holding on to Hope" in the November 2008 issue of *Book Links*.

Jimi and Me. By Jaime Adoff. 2005. 336p. Hyperion/Jump at the Sun, \$15.99 (9780786852147); paper, \$7.99 (9781423104001).

In this John Steptoe Author Award winner, Keith James is an eighth-grader coping with the death of his father. Despite being uprooted from his home in Brooklyn to a small town in Ohio, he takes comfort in memories of his father and their shared love of Jimi Hendrix's music. When he uncovers a secret about his father, he learns painful lessons about life and family love.

Let It Shine: Stories of Black Women Freedom Fighters. By Andrea Davis Pinkney. Illus. by Stephen Alcorn. 2000. 120p. Harcourt/Gulliver, \$20 (9780152010058).

A nonfiction narrative as dramatic as any in fiction describes the true stories of 10 women whose courage and actions changed American history. In this Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book, Pinkney spotlights well-known heroines, such as Harriet Tubman, as well as some unfamiliar to today's young readers, such as Fannie Lou Hamer.

Maritcha: A Nineteenth-Century American Girl. By Tonya Bolden. 2005. 48p. Abrams, \$17.95 (9780810950450).

Maritcha Rémond Lyons, born free in New York City, was forced to flee

with her family during the Civil War Draft Riots. This experience did not break her activist spirit as she sued to attend an all-white high school in 1860s Rhode Island. This Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book provides additional insight into life before, during, and after the Civil War. For more on this author, see "Talking with Tonya Bolden" on p.26.

Miracle's Boys. By Jacqueline Woodson. 2000. 144p. Putnam, \$15.99 (9780399231131); Puffin, paper, \$5.99 (9780142406021). Also available in an audio edition from Listening Library.

This spare, poetic Coretta Scott King Author Award winner presents the story of three brothers—Ty'ree, Charlie, and Lafayette—and their struggle to stay together as a family after the death of their mother. Despite difficulties, the strong values and love of learning that their mother instilled in them sustain the brothers, allowing them to overcome seemingly overwhelming odds.

Standing against the Wind. By Traci L. Jones. 2006. 192p. Farrar, \$16 (9780374371746).

Prior to her mother's incarceration, 13-year-old Patrice is uprooted from her comfortable home in Georgia and forced to live with her aunt in Chicago. In this John Steptoe Author Award winner, Patrice is a character with strong self-determination who learns how to dodge the cruel bullying of streetwise boys and ultimately reach her goals.

Twelve Rounds to Glory: The Story of Muhammad Ali. By Charles R. Smith Jr. Illus. by Bryan Collier. 2007. 80p. Candlewick, \$19.99 (9780763616922).

Muhammad Ali continues to fascinate readers, as this Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book shows in its unique look at the iconic athlete. Smith's poems evoke the rhymes Ali once created, and Collier's bold collages complement the lively text.

Who Am I without Him? Short Stories about Girls and the Boys in Their Lives. By Sharon G. Flake. 2004. 160p. Hyperion/Jump at the Sun, \$15.99 (9780786806935); paper, \$7.99 (9781423103837).

In this Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book, 10 short stories set in and around the lives of urban girls reflect common concerns of all female teens as they seek understanding of themselves through their relationships with their male counterparts.

Grades 9–12

High-school students can navigate the multiple perspectives in this group of titles. Titles such as *Day of Tears*, *The Land*, and *A Wreath for Emmett Till* encourage further background research and additional reading to place the historical subjects in broader contexts. There are opportunities to compare and contrast poetic forms as well. High-school hazing and teen pregnancy are explored in *The Battle of Jericho* and *The First Part Last*.

The Battle of Jericho. By Sharon M. Draper. 2003. 304p. Atheneum, \$17.95 (9780689842320); Simon Pulse, paper, \$6.99 (9780689842337).

In this Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book, eleventh-grader Jericho Prescott is ecstatic that he has been asked to pledge the Warriors of Distinction, the most prestigious club in his school. Soon, however, he realizes that the secrecy

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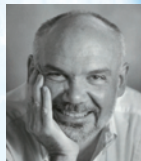
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of the club hides a sinister side, and he must make some tough decisions about his own involvement with its members.

Bronx Masquerade. By Nikki Grimes. 2001. 176p. Dial, \$16.99 (9780803725690); Puffin, paper, \$6.99 (9780142501894). Also available in an audio edition from Recorded Books.

In this Coretta Scott King Author Award winner, a teacher in a Bronx high school institutes an open-mic poetry slam to encourage his students to write their own poetry. As their resistance to the event lessens, the 18 students begin to use verse to explore their feelings about themselves, their school, and the world in which they live.

Chill Wind. By Janet McDonald. 2002. 144p. Farrar, paper, \$6.95 (9780374411831).

Unwed with two children, 19-year-old Aisha has to find a way to support herself and her family. A high-school dropout with no skills, she learns that there are no easy answers. Fortunately, Aisha has a strong spirit, and she uses her street smarts to land an unusual job. With authentic voice and setting, McDonald depicts the real world of many urban teens in this John Steptoe Author Award winner.

Day of Tears: A Novel in Dialogue. By Julius Lester. 2005. 192p. Hyperion/Jump at the Sun, \$15.99 (9780786804900); paper, \$7.99 (9781423104094). Also available in an audio edition from Recorded Books.

This Coretta Scott King Author Award winner fictionalizes a real event: the largest slave auction in American history. During two days in March 1859, 400 slaves from Pierce Butler's plantation in Savannah, Georgia, were sold. This novel in verse presents events through multiple voices, allowing readers to share the range of experiences and emotions related to this tragic but little-known event.


The First Part Last. By Angela Johnson. 2003. 144p. Simon & Schuster, \$15.95 (9780689849220); Simon Pulse, paper, \$6.99 (9780689849237). Also available in an audio edition from Listening Library.

In chapters alternating between past and present, 16-year-old Bobby details the events of his life before and after he became a parent. Bobby's layered story is revealed piece by piece, until the reality of life as a single parent comes sharply into focus. Johnson's spare yet elegant prose in this Coretta Scott King Author Award winner is well suited to the gripping family story.

The Land. By Mildred D. Taylor. 2001. 392p. Dial, \$17.99 (9780803719507); Puffin, paper, \$6.99 (9780142501467). Also available in an audio edition from Listening Library.

Despite being acknowledged and raised by his white father, biracial Paul-Edward Logan learns that there are limits to what he can expect from the former slave-owner in post-Civil War Georgia. In this Coretta Scott King Author Award winner, Paul-Edward sets out to prove that he can become a successful landowner like his father, a quest that sends him far from home and sees him confronting the best and the worst of the Reconstruction-era South.

A Wreath for Emmett Till. By Marilyn Nelson. Illus. by Philippe Lardy. 2005. 48p. Houghton, \$17 (9780618397525); Graphia, paper, \$7.99 (9780547076362).

In this Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book, Nelson introduces readers to a unique poetic form in an intensely moving and elegant round of sonnets that reveals the cost of racial hatred as it recounts the brutal lynching of a young African American boy in 1956. 

Deborah Taylor, current chair of the Coretta Scott King Book Awards Committee, is a past-president of YALSA and has served on numerous book award committees. She is Coordinator of School and Student Services of the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Maryland.