

# CORETTA SCOTT KING AWARDS DISCUSSION GUIDE

Spring 2000



**American Library Association  
Social Responsibilities Round Table  
Coretta Scott King Task Force**

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<http://www.ala.org/srrt/csking>**

This Discussion Guide was written for the Coretta Scott King (CSK) Task Force by GraceAnne A. DeCandido (<http://www.well.com/user/ladyhawk/gadhome.html>).

The Coretta Scott King Award Seal was designed by internationally-known artist Lev Mills in 1974. The symbolism used in designing the seal centers around Dr. King's teachings and doctrines, the purpose for which the Award was founded.

The basic circle represents continuity in movement, revolving from one idea to another. Within the circle is the image of a black child reading a book. The five main religious symbols below the image of the child represent nonsectarianism. The superimposed pyramid symbolizes both strength and Atlanta University, where the Award was headquartered at the time the seal was designed. At the apex of the pyramid is the dove, symbolic of peace, one of Dr. King's doctrines. The rays shine toward peace and brotherhood.

The CSK seals have recently been revised; the new bronze and black seal denotes a Coretta Scott King Award winner, and the new pewter and black seal denotes an honor book. The former bronze seal (for winners) and pewter seals (for honors) can still be used.

## **W**hat keeps a book alive?

For thirty years now, books by African American writers and artists have been honored by being named Coretta Scott King (CSK) Award winners or CSK Honor books. After three decades, a marvelous and rich collection of books to delight and to instruct young people can be found under this banner. In this guide, we will take a look at the history of the award, highlight some of the wonderful books that have received it, and provide librarians, teachers, booksellers, and parents with various ways to bring these titles into the lives of children.

A book lives in those who read and cherish and share it. The Coretta Scott King Award books live where children do: in cities and rural areas; in biographies and folktales; in poetry and history; in music and in picture books. What keeps a book alive is the sharing of these books among children and between children and their teachers, parents, and caregivers. The history of the award honors that connection.

## How the award came to be

In 1969, while attending the American Library Association Meeting in New Jersey, Mabel McKissick and Glyndon Greer, two school librarians, had a chance meeting at a booth when both were trying to get a poster of the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. It was a time of great turmoil in the country. Both women loved children's literature and were troubled because no African American authors and illustrators had been distinguished with awards for their work. John Carroll, publisher at the booth where the two were vying for the poster, asked them why they didn't start an award to do so. The three met later that evening through the early morning hours to develop their idea of honoring African American authors for their significant contributions to children's literature. From that planning session, the Coretta Scott King Award was born.

The Coretta Scott King Award had an humble inception at the May 1970 dinner gala of the New Jersey Library Association, where Lillie Patterson was honored for her biography, *Martin Luther King, Jr. Man of Peace*. In 1972, Coretta Scott King Group held its first breakfast at an ALA conference site (but without ALA recognition). The award for illustrators was added four years later in 1974 and presented to George Ford for his illustrations in Sharon Bell Mathis' biography, *Ray Charles*. The award had still not gained official affiliation with the American Library Association. That affiliation came in 1980, when the CSK Group became a part of SRRT (Social Responsibilities Round Table) as the Coretta Scott King Task Force. Then two years later, in 1982, the American Library Association recognized the Coretta Scott King Award as an association award, twelve years after the first award was given.

The annual Coretta Scott King Awards breakfast is unique, too, in that children themselves are invited to take part, and each author and illustrator honored speaks briefly. New authors and illustrators are now honored with the New Talent Award, instituted in 1993.

Among their many other functions, book awards provide a simple means for casual browsers in bookstores and in libraries to find material that is engaging, well-crafted, and satisfying both emotionally and intellectually. The Coretta Scott King Award particularly introduces the best in African American literature to all children. The Award now graces dozens of titles from picture books for the smallest children to novels and nonfiction for teenagers.

In this guide, we are going to examine some of these titles from different angles and perspectives. We'll examine music as a theme. We'll look at poetry and connect it to storytelling and folktales. We'll see how history and biography can make the past live in the present. And finally, we will look at generations and family connections, in fiction and among the artists and writers of Coretta Scott King fame.

These brief comments are meant to provide a spark to engender family read-alouds, classroom discussions, bookstore promotions, and library programs. Enjoy!

## Making Music

In picture books, in biographies, in poetry and in fiction, music is the heartbeat of African American life. The vibrant poetry picture book *Harlem*, written by Walter Dean Myers and illustrated by his son Christopher Myers, designated a CSK Honor book in 1998 for its illustrations, pulses with the sound of jazz and the blues.

The 1999 award winner for illustration, *i see the rhythm*, by Toyomi Igus and illustrated by Michele Wood, is an extraordinary mix of poetry and images encompassing the whole of black music history. A historical timeline traces the action, from the 1740s when slaves were forbidden to play drums so they could not communicate with each other in ways unknown to their masters, to slave songs, gospel, blues, ragtime, jazz, bebop, rock & roll, soul, funk, and hip-hop. Pattern, repetition, and color make a visual counterpoint to the music. The illustrations and poetry are accessible to a wide range of child readers and listeners; the timeline adds historical context.

In an illustration Honor book from 1999, *The Bat Boy and his Violin* written by Gavin Curtis and illustrated by E.B. Lewis, a subtle musing on the power of music connects a bit of history about the Negro Leagues in 1948 with a classic action/contemplation debate between a little boy named Reginald and his baseball-manager dad.

The street-smart and touching *Jazmin's Notebook*, the 1999 winner for author Nikki Grimes, finds a girl and her older sister wringing out hard love in words. Jazmin writes poetry in that notebook, and knows her mother is "broken in places nobody but

God can fix." Her music is in her words, as rhythmically inflected as her jazz-inspired name.

In your reading of these books, consider the following:

- \*How can we talk about music in words?
- \*How do the syncopated shapes and colors in *Harlem* and in *i see the rhythm* make visual sense out of music?
- \*Is there a rhythm of the street?
- \*How does the effect of music reflect the place that is *Harlem*?
- \*How does violin-playing affect the players in the dugout of Reginald's father's Dukes in the *Bat Boy and his Violin*?
- \*What's the conflict between Reginald and his dad over music?
- \*The music of language is comfort and succor to Jazmin. How does she find that music, and that comfort, in her notebook? In the library?

Other music CSK titles include *What a Morning! The Christmas Story in Black Spirituals* illustrated by Ashley Bryan, selected by John Langstaff, *Aida* by Leontyne Price, illustrated by the Dillons, *All Night, All Day: A Child's First Book of African American Spirituals* illustrated and selected by Ashley Bryan.

## Poetry, Prose, and Angela Johnson

This writer appeals to older children and teenagers because her language is so vivid and natural, and she moves so easily between poetry and prose. Her 1999 Honor book, *The Other Side: Shorter Poems*, is a collection of poems that tell a single story: the razing of Shorter, Alabama, the town where she grew up. Johnson writes brief sketches of people and events that blaze like the Southern sun and that glow like the red Alabama dirt. She captures her dad's Viet Nam nightmares; her Uncle Fred's scar; the scent of laundry soap on a hot day; the loss of an old dog, and she does so in immediate, accessible language.

## Folktale, Myth, and Virginia Hamilton

Pair this with her 1994 award winning novel, *Toning the Sweep*. Once again, Johnson's language captures a landscape, this time of the Arizona desert, as well as the heart's landscape, as Emmie and her mom pack up Emmie's beloved grandmother Ola, to bring her home to Ohio to die. In the process, Emmie comes to terms with the truth of her grandfather's murder, and with her mother and grandmother's uneasy ties. The title refers to the practice of a hammering a plow to announce a death, to "ring the dead person's soul to heaven."

Reading Johnson's 1999 award winner, *Heaven*, we see 14-year-old Marley - named for reggae master Bob Marley — learning that she is adopted far too late, and through the alchemy of her pain earning a new understanding of those she is related to.

The novels and the poetry together can lead to rich conversations:

- \*How does the place we are from affect the place where we are now?
- \*How do our lives reflect and contrast with our parents' and grandparents' lives?
- \*How do historical events - the civil rights movement, the bulldozing of an old town - have an impact on how people live and see themselves?
- \*Poetry can be conversational and realistic; prose can be evocative and poetic. Angela Johnson's supple and lyrical use of language moves across poetry and prose. How does she do that? Who else does that?

Other CSK poetry titles include *In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall* by Javaka Steptoe, *The Palm of My Heart*, illustrated by Gregorie Christie, edited by Davida Adedjouma, *Brown Honey and Broomwheat Tea* by Joyce Carol Thomas, illustrated by Floyd Cooper, and the Meyers' *Harlem*, discussed in the music section.

Few authors can match the literary range and psychological breadth of Virginia Hamilton. Over many years and many titles, she has shared the gift of her exquisite vision in novels, folktales, and picture books for young people.

In *The People Could Fly*, the 1986 Author award winner, and in *Her Stories*, a 1996 Honor book, Hamilton mines the rich fields of African American folktales, fairy tales, and family stories. Illustrated by the artists Leo and Diane Dillon, these collections touch listeners and readers as if they were hearing their own half-forgotten memories. Hamilton writes in *Her Stories* about how she learned some of them: "A moment before my mother made up the story, our house felt as if it had gathered itself in. It braced itself, it shook and trembled, and so did I."

These tales often take on mythic resonance. The common human dream of flying is combined with the many examples in black folk literature of flying African slaves who left their wings behind to make a heartbreaking image for a fettered people. The stories of mothers and aunts bring their audience together on the back porch or around the table, to listen and to understand.

Hamilton's *Sweet Whispers*, *Brother Rush*, a novel for older children, delicately weaves a ghostly presence, a bit of family mysticism, sibling connections, and the strange disease porphyria into a haunting tale of love, loss, and mystery.

Some questions for discussion might be:

- \*How does Virginia Hamilton combine the voices of her characters with myth and mysticism?
- \*How does the dailyness of life in *Sweet Whispers*, *Brother*

*Rush* intensify the ghostly presence of Brother Rush, and give him reality?

\*The Dillons' evocative illustrations reflect and refract Hamilton's language. How do the pictures support and extend the stories in the two folktale collections?

Other CSK folktales include *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: an African Tale* by John Steptoe, *The Dark-Thirty: Tales of the Supernatural* by Patricia C. McKissack, *Lion and the Ostrich Chicks and Other African Folk Tales* by Ashley Bryan.

## History, biography, and Jackie Robinson

A new edition of *I Never Had It Made: the Autobiography of Jackie Robinson*, one of the earliest Coretta Scott King winners, came out in 1995, with a foreword by Cornel West. Describing Robinson's first appearance on Ebbets Field in "one of the sacred spaces of American culture," West provides an easy lead-in to the unpolished but heartfelt story that Robinson tells. Besides the perennially compelling tale of being the first African American to play in the Major Leagues, Robinson's saga also connects him to his historical time. He knew and clashed with Malcolm X; he worked for Republican Nelson Rockefeller but supported Democrat Lyndon Johnson in 1964. He writes with bittersweet honesty of his relationship to Branch Rickey, who made his playing first base for the Dodgers possible. Perhaps most movingly, he writes of the support and succor he received consistently from his wife Rachel, called Rae. She glows in these pages, a steady twin star to Robinson's fame.

*I Never Had It Made* has so many "hooks" for teen readers that it would serve as the basis of any

number of discussions in the classroom or with parents or book groups.

\*The place of African Americans in sports, and in American life - how does Michael Jordan relate to Jackie Robinson?

\*Historical figures do not exist in a vacuum. What was happening historically when Jackie Robinson found himself at odds with Malcolm X?

\*What effect does fame have on a family? The Robinsons lost a troubled son. How did what was happening in his father's life affect Jackie Robinson Jr.?

Other CSK biographies include *Malcolm X: by Any Means Necessary* by Walter Dean Myers, *Black Troubador: Langston Hughes* by Charlemae Rollins, *Minty, A Story of Young Harriet Tubman* by Alan Schroeder, illustrated by Jerry Pinkney, *Sojourner Truth: Ain't I a Woman?* By Patricia C. and Frederick L. McKissack.

CSK history titles include *Breaking Ground, Breaking Silence: The Story of New York's African Burial Ground*, by Joyce Hansen and Gary McGowan; *The Middle Passage: White Ships Black Cargo* by Tom Feelings; the fictional but powerful *The Watsons Go to Birmingham 1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis, *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* by Margaree King Mitchell illustrated by James Ransome; *A Long Hard Journey, Story of the Pullman Porter* by Patricia and Frederick McKissack.

\*A good biography or history book enables us to see that real people made history, and they had lives and concerns just like ours. In what ways can we see the fictional Watsons or the persons named and discovered in the burial grounds of New York as people like us? In what ways are their lives very different?

\*If all of us are a part of history, how would you like to be remembered? What story would you like people to tell about you in ten years, or in a hundred years?

## Generations/Family connections

How people's lives are set in their families, how they break from them, draw strength from them, and define themselves within them make for family connections in many CSK titles. Sibling relationships are the core in *Like Sisters on the Homefront* by Rita Williams-Garcia, as well as in *Sweet Whispers*, *Brother Rush* by Virginia Hamilton and *Jazmin's Notebook* by Nikki Grimes, discussed in folklore and in music. Family relationships are at the center of *Justin and the Best Biscuits in the World* by Mildred Pitts Walter, *Forged by Fire* by Sharon Draper, and *Childtimes: A Three-Generation Memoir* by Eloise Greenfield and Lessie Jones Little.

\*Brothers and sisters play together, work together, and sometimes fight together. What other kinds of relationships do we see between siblings in these books? Parenting? Role models? Friendship?

\*The absence of parents can mean as much, or more than their presence. In what ways is that visible in these books?

It's hard to miss the family connections among many of the award winners. Many children of authors and illustrators have followed in their parents' footsteps, creating wonderful collaborations. Some do not work with their parents but are clearly inspired by and connected to them. Others are husband-and-wife teams. Such generational connections can be a fruitful starting point for thinking about family, genealogy, the relationship of work to home life, the connection between words and illustrations, and so on.

Coretta Scott King authors and illustrators are a vibrant source of these connections. Patricia C. and Frederick L. McKissack, authors of the 1997

Honor book *Rebels Against Slavery* and the 1993 Honor book *Sojourner Truth*, among many other titles, are an example of a couple who write together. The prolific artists Leo and Diane Dillon have made art that endures in many Coretta Scott King titles and dozens of other books.

Walter Dean Myers, who has written more Coretta Scott King winners and honor books than any other author, was also the author of the rhythmic poetry in the 1998 illustrator award Honor title *Harlem*. That book was illustrated by his son, Christopher Myers. Artist Jerry Pinkney's son, artist Brian Pinkney and daughter-in-law, writer Andrea Davis Pinkney produced the 1999 honor title *Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and his Orchestra*, among others. Jerry Pinkney won for his art in 1986 for *The Patchwork Quilt* and in 1997 for his art in *Minty: A Story of Young Harriet Tubman*. Javaka Steptoe honors the memory of his father John Steptoe in the inventive and engaging collages of *In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall*, the 1998 illustrator award winner, as well as in its collection of wonderful poems about fathers and children. John Steptoe's illustrations were honored in 1983 for *All the Colors of the Race*.

Some questions for discussion might be:

\*Do artistic styles or writing styles run in families?

\*How are artists influenced by and affected by other artists, especially when those artists might be family members?

## Books Mentioned in Coretta Scott King Discussion Guide

### Reading/Interest Levels

<u>Author</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Reading/Interest Levels</u>
Adoff, Arnold	All the Colors of the Race	k-3/k-5
Bryan, Ashley	<i>Lion and the Ostrich Chicks and Other African Folk Tales</i>	4.2/3-6
	<i>What a Morning! The Christmas Story in Black Spirituals</i>	4.8/3-6 /k-3
Christie, Gregorie	<i>The Palm of My Heart</i>	2/k-3
Curtis, Christopher Paul	<i>The Watson's Go to Birmingham</i>	5/5-8
Curtis, Gavin	<i>The Bat Boy and his Violin</i>	5.2/k-3
Draper, Sharon	<i>Forged by Fire</i>	6.8/YA
Feelings, Tom	<i>The Middle Passage: White Ships Black Cargo</i>	/YA
Grimes, Nikki	<i>Jazmin's Notebook</i>	/YA
Greenfield, Eloise and Lessie Jones Little	<i>Childtimes: A Three-Generation Memoir</i>	5.6/5-8
Hamilton, Virginia	<i>Her Stories</i>	4.3/3-6
	<i>The People Could Fly</i>	4.3/3-6
	<i>Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush</i>	5.3/5-8
Hansen, Joyce and Gary McGowan	<i>The Story of New York's African Burial Ground</i>	7.4/5-8
Igus, Toyomi	<i>i see the rhythm</i>	6.8/3-6
Johnson, Angela	<i>Heaven</i>	/YA
	<i>The Other Side: Shorter Poems</i>	3.5/5-8
	<i>Toning the Sweep</i>	5.4/5-8
McKissack, Patricia C.	<i>The Dark Thirty: Tales of the Supernatural</i>	6.9/5-8

<u>Author</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Reading/Interest Levels</u>
McKissack, Patricia C. & Frederick L.	<i>Rebels Against Slavery</i>	7.9/5-8
	<i>A Long Hard Journey, Story of the Pullman Porter</i>	/5-8
	<i>Sojourner Truth: Ain't I a Woman?</i>	/5-8
Mathis, Sharon Bell	<i>Ray Charles</i>	
Mitchell, Margaree King	<i>Uncle Jed's Barbershop</i>	4.5/k-3
Myers, Walter Dean	<i>Malcolm X: by Any Means Necessary Harlem</i>	/YA 4.5/3-6
Patterson, Lillie	<i>Martin Luther King Jr., Man of Peace</i>	/YA
Pinkney, Brian and Andrea Davis	<i>Duke Ellington: the Piano Prince and his Orchestra</i>	5.5 /2-4
Pinkney, Jerry	<i>The Patchwork Quilt</i>	3.5/k-3
Price, Leontyne	<i>Aida</i>	5.9/5-8
Robinson, Jackie	<i>I Never Had it Made</i>	/YA-Adult
Rollins, Charlemae	<i>Black Troubador: Langston Hughes</i>	3-5/2-5
Schroeder, Alan	<i>Minty, a story of young Harriet Tubman</i>	3.9/k-3
Step toe, Javaka	<i>In Daddy's Arms I Am Tall</i>	2.8 /k-3
Step toe, John	<i>Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: an African Tale</i>	5.2/k-3
Thomas, Joyce Carol	<i>Brown Honey and Broomwheat Tea</i>	4.5/k-3
Walter, Mildred Pitts	<i>Justin and the Best Biscuits in the World</i>	5.2/3-6
Williams-Garcia, Rita	<i>Like Sisters on the Homefront</i>	/YA

## Spread the Word

- \*Booktalk titles to teachers
- \*Make a presentation about the Coretta Scott King Awards to the PTA or parenting groups
- \*Make a display of illustration winners and honor books to spotlight different kinds of art and illustration techniques.
- \*Plan author visits to schools or local bookstores.
- \*Though CSK titles can be highlighted all year round, they make a particularly rich theme for African American History Month in February.
- \*Does your local newspaper have a book column? Does a local radio station do "book spots"? Contribute reviews and roundups based on the Awards list, or suggest that the columnist do so.

## Coretta Scott King Books: A Complete List

A description of the award and its history is on the Coretta Scott King web page at <http://www.ala.org/srrt/csking/index.html>. The web site also includes a complete list of all the Award winners and Honor books, contact names, and other pertinent information, <http://www.ala.org/srrt/csking/cskawin.html>.

A full-color brochure of the Coretta Scott King Award winners and Honor books, with book covers and photos of the authors and illustrators, is available from ALA Graphics, <http://www.ala.org/srrt/csking/cskapubs.html>. It can be purchased in bulk for use with parent groups, teachers, class visits, and handouts.

A video about the Coretta Scott King Awards will be available in Fall 2000. Check the CSK page <http://www.ala.org/srrt/csking/index.html> for ordering information for use on your library or community cable channel, for booktalking, or to add to your parenting video collection.

## Bibliography

Smith, Henrietta M. edit. *The Coretta Scott King Awards Book 1970-1999*. ALA. 1999. ISBN 0-8389-3496-X. Order from ALA Editions 800-545-2433 Press 7 to order.

The history of the award, annotations on every one of the winners and honor books, conversations with Walter Dean Myers and Jerry Pinkney, color illustrations from many of the winning titles, and biographies of the authors make this an invaluable resource.

*Black Authors and Illustrators of Books for Children and Young Adults: A Biographical Dictionary*. Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, Vol. 21 by Barbara Thrash Murphy (Editor), Barbara Rollock. Hardcover - 350 pages 3rd edition (January 1999) Garland Pub; ISBN: 0815320043

*Black Books Galore! Guide to Great African American Children's Books*. Donna Rand, Toni Trent Parker, Sheila Foster. Wiley. \$15.95 pbk. 243p. 1998. ISBN: 0471193534.