The Coretta Scott King (CSK) Book Award was established in 1969 in association with the American Library Association (ALA). It was created as a result of a conversation between two librarians, Glyndon Flynt Greer and Mabel McKissick, and a publisher named John Carroll, during which they expressed their concerns that no African American authors or illustrators up to that point in time had ever received ALA’s prestigious Newbery and Caldecott Medals (Smith, 2004). “It was thought that the establishment of a special award would bring attention to the fine work produced by African American authors and illustrators in books for children and young people” (Smith, 2004, p. ix). As a result, the CSK Book Award is given annually to African American authors and illustrators, and its purpose is to recognize outstanding children’s books that portray some aspect of the black experience—past, present, or future. In 1995, the first Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe New Talent Award was given. This award was created to recognize and showcase up-and-coming African American authors and illustrators.

In 2014, the CSK Book Award will celebrate its 45th anniversary. This column offers a tribute to the award by showcasing a few of our favorite winners/honor books. Some of these titles were published recently while others were published several decades ago. Many notable authors and illustrators of children’s literature—Virginia Hamilton, Kadir Nelson, Nikki Grimes, Mildred Taylor, Bryan Collier, and Angela Johnson, among others—are included here. For several of them (e.g., Kadir Nelson and Bryan Collier), the CSK Book Award served as a means by which to introduce them to the children’s book world. It is our hope that this column will inspire teachers, librarians, teacher educators, and children to begin or to continue reading and enjoying CSK Book Award titles all year long.

Reference


**Uptown**

Written and illustrated by Bryan Collier


2001 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Winner

“Uptown is a caterpillar. Well, it’s really the Metro-North train as it eases over the Harlem River.” Thus begins this marvelous picturebook where a young boy describes his neighborhood, highlighting the landmarks, activities, and sounds. Uptown is everything from chicken and waffles served around the clock to a row of brownstones that look like they’re made of chocolate. On weekends, uptown is shopping on 125th street and going to the Apollo Theater to see the greatest entertainers in the world. In addition, uptown is jazz and a barbershop where last night’s ball game is discussed. There are little sisters wearing matching dresses on their way to church and an orange sunset over the Hudson River.

The beautiful figurative language enables young readers to feel what it is like to be in Harlem.

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Lastly, the boy says, “Uptown is Harlem . . . Harlem world, my world. Uptown is home.” The vibrant watercolor and collage illustrations began as basic pencil drawings. Collier painted color washes where he added layer after layer of color. He then flipped through old magazine pictures looking for patterns and interesting pieces to glue on top of each other. Next, he made photocopies of the pictures, putting all of the pieces together. The bold textured images celebrate Harlem’s culture traditions, music, and people. Everyone who reads this book will be transported to Harlem. (DD)

When I Am Old with You
Written by Angela Johnson
Illustrated by David Soman

The loving relationship between a young boy and his grandfather is remarkably told in this award-winning book. As each page is turned, the expressive text and vivid illustrations unite eloquently to tell the story of a boy’s dreams of sharing unique and memorable experiences with his grandfather as they grow old together. Their love is undeniable as the boy visualizes the two of them holding conversations in rocking chairs, going fishing in the old canoe, playing cards under an old tree, looking at old pictures and rummaging through cedar chests in the attic, having breakfast on the porch, visiting the ocean, riding through grassy fields, taking long walks along the woods, and more. As the grandson anticipates the future, the expressions of joy, loss, anticipation, longing, intrigue, sadness, and contentment are clearly recognizable on both of their faces. Additionally, Soman’s exquisite two-page illustrations of the serene fishing pond, grassy meadows, evening skies illuminated by fireflies, and gatherings around campfires candidly exemplify settings commonly found in rural communities across America. Children ages 4–6 will adore this unforgettable intergenerational tale—a tale of love, family, and community. A tale that inspires readers to revere time shared with loved ones. (AB)

Ellington Was Not a Street
Written by Ntozake Shange
Illustrated by Kadir Nelson

2005 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Winner

This homage to African American men who made history is intended for contemporary children who know these names only as commemorative plaques on buildings or streets. The opening spread shows a street sign indicating “Ellington St.” with pedestrians walking beneath it, unaware; facing text from Shange’s poem “Mood Indigo” (not the Duke Ellington composition of the same name; originally published in A Daughter’s Geography, St. Martin’s Press, 1983) reads “it hasnt always been this way / ellington was not a street” [sic]. “Mood Indigo” is interpreted here from the point of view of a young girl; in bell hooks’s style, there is little punctuation and no capitalization, which adds to the childlike tone.

The spare text accompanies a series of vignettes featuring dignified, richly colored portraits of the men when they come to visit: “robeson no mere memory,” “du bois walked up my father’s stairs,” and so on. A tribute to what these men did for African Americans, indeed all Americans, is soulful and succinct: “Our doors opened like our daddy’s arms, held us safe and loved”; the artwork reinforces this message with a touching image of a loving father hugging his two children. The image of the masses walking obliviously beneath the street sign and its refrain are repeated throughout, emphasizing the retrospective nature. The final, satisfying image shows Ellington himself, smiling
and holding his baton, with one last reminder that “it wasn’t always this way / ellington was not a street.” Details about Paul Robeson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington himself, and others mentioned in the text are provided at the end. (DF)

Before John Was a Jazz Giant: A Song of John Coltrane
Written by Carole Boston Weatherford
Illustrated by Sean Qualls
2009 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor

Before John was a jazz giant, he was all ears, and boy did he listen. Blue notes have been crooning John’s name long before he picked up the saxophone. Written by award-winners Carole Boston Weatherford and Sean Qualls, this picturebook biography delivers an aesthetic and poetic soundtrack to the sounds of John Coltrane’s childhood. The lyrical tones generated by everyday people and practices are presented as the melodies that mentored John toward becoming one of the world’s most renowned jazz legends. Part of the text reads, “Before John was a jazz giant, he heard hambones knocking in Grandma’s pots, Daddy strumming the ukulele, and Mama cranking the phonograph.” He heard steam engines whistling past and Bojangles tap-dancing in the picture show.

The couplets that form the text are paired with Squall’s whimsical and poignant series of two-page spreads and openings, both reflecting the vastness and richness of Coltrane’s musical influences. Squall’s mixed-media portraits layer in the dancing lines of text as part of the textures and blues-inspired palette of the illustrations. Like a favorite song, this picturebook was composed as a piece of art to be read aloud and enjoyed. This book would pair nicely with literature like Dizzy (2006) and Charlie Parker Played Be Bop (1997) and as part of a larger picturebook biography collection exploring music greats. A concluding note from the author offers an overview of Coltrane’s life and career, in addition to a list of selected songs and readings. (AZ)

Uncle Jed’s Barbershop
Written by Margaree King Mitchell
Illustrated by James Ransome
1994 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor

Uncle Jed’s Barbershop is the story of itinerant barber Jedediah Johnson told by his grandniece Sarah Jean. Each week, Uncle Jed spends time with Sarah Jean, pretend-cutting her hair, smoothing barber’s lotion on her neck, and sharing his dream of opening a barbershop. Featuring predominantly earth tones with splashes of blues and greens, Ransome’s richly detailed oil paintings bring the story to life. In a particularly meaningful tableau, a spotted hound dog occupies a braided rug as Sarah Jean sits on Uncle Jed’s lap with a tube radio and pot-bellied stove in the background. She listens as he smiles broadly and gesticulates.

Mitchell’s straightforward style and matter-of-fact discussion of racist practices in the Jim Crow South frame Uncle Jed’s character. His demeanor is decisive, resilient, and focused. When Sarah Jean becomes sick at age five and is refused treatment, Uncle Jed’s savings save her. When his new savings are lost in the 1929 bank collapse and work is scarce during the Great Depression, Uncle Jed is disappointed, not bitter. Like Mitchell’s story and Ransome’s illustrations, Uncle Jed is low key while his emotions are deep. Detailed close-ups of his face, gestures, and stance reinforce this.

He finally opens his barbershop at the age 79. It is filled with customers, including his middle-aged grandniece. He dies shortly after, having dreamed and having taught his grandniece to
The People Could Fly: The Picture Book
Written by Virginia Hamilton
Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon
2005 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor

The People Could Fly is a profound masterpiece. It is a multifaceted tale of brutality and anguish, compassion and liberation, longing, faith, and hope that is, as Hamilton wrote, “both somber and uplifting.” The title story in Hamilton’s 1985 folklore collection, it was published as a picturebook in her honor after her death. (Sadly, Leo Dillon’s 2012 death means this review is in tribute also to him.) Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon, as was the original black-and-white collection, the picturebook is a perfect union of Hamilton’s engaging storytelling style and the elegance and intensity of the Dillons’ 30 full-color paintings. The original collection’s cover depicted the end of the tale, as magical Africans, dressed in tatters, escaped chattel slavery through flight. The picturebook cover illustrates the beginning, showing richly garbed, serene Africans with gorgeous blue-black wings living freely before experiencing capture, the horrors of the Middle Passage, and enslavement. Black endpapers embossed with shiny feathers embody the delight of magical flight and the sorrow of feathers shed in brutal captivity.

In Daddy’s Arms I Am Tall is an eclectic collection of 12 poems written by various authors (e.g., Sonia Sanchez, E. Ethelbert Miller, and Carole Boston Weatherford) about African American fathers. My favorite poem is written by Angela Johnson, and it is titled “Her Daddy’s Hands.” It reads, “His hands, you see, Mama says / were hard and calloused. / They worked all day making bricks / that made houses he’d show her / as he flew his noisy old pick-up down the red / Alabama roads. / But on Sundays, / those hands, you see / felt soft, / and would hold my mama’s and walk her to church. / Quietly. / Him in black, her in white / along those red Alabama roads.” Other poems in this collection include “The Things in Black Men’s Closets” and “Promises.” The collage artwork adds a strong emotional dimension to this book by depicting the love and closeness between children and their daddies. It features a wide range of objects such as fish, pennies, leaves, construction paper, and soil. (JM)
Taking orders from his mother to clean his room before Grandpa comes, Justin feels embarrassed when Grandpa arrives and his room is in disarray. Feeling left out, belittled, and angry, Justin admits to his Grandpa that he can’t quite seem to do anything the right way. Grandpa invites Justin to stay with him at the Q-T Ranch for the rest of the summer. At the ranch, Justin learns valuable lessons from Grandpa. He learns how to make his bed, fold his clothes, and make the best biscuits in the world. Justin discovers his rich family history, black cowboys, and rodeos. As he begins to feel proud of himself, he realizes that anyone can do anything once they learn how. This influential pioneering literary work will be excellent for discussing the settlement of the American frontier, the Wild West, African Americans and the Homestead Act, family genealogy, intergenerational bonding, and how making good choices will bring positive changes. (CM)

Justin and the Best Biscuits in the World
Written by Mildred Pitts Walter
Illustrated by Catherine Stock
ISBN 978-0-6880-6645-1
1987 Coretta Scott King Author Award

Ten-year-old Justin lives with his mother and two sisters, Evelyn and Hadiya. His father died four years earlier in an automobile accident, and Justin found being the only male in a household of nagging females to be challenging. While their mother works, Evelyn is in charge of the house and Justin dislikes this! Evelyn criticizes him about everything, especially for not being able to clean his room, wash dishes, or even cook an egg. According to Justin, this is “women’s work” and he hates it. When he tries to do these tasks, Evelyn always complains, but no one shows him how. Justin is frustrated: all he wants to do is play his favorite game, one-on-one basketball with his friend Anthony. When his mother announces that Grandpa Ward, his favorite person, is coming to his house for a visit, Justin is happy.

Talkin’ about Bessie: The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman
Written by Nikki Grimes
Illustrated by E. B. Lewis
2003 Coretta Scott King Author Honor

This fictional biography tells the story of Elizabeth Coleman through a series of eulogies written as poems. Twenty different narrators, from a field hand to a flight instructor to family members, reminisce about Bessie’s incredible life. First, George Coleman, her father, remembers the day she was born and when she was a toddler, “She was jus’ a chile then, spendin’ happy days / waterin’ roses, weeding’ where corn, / kale, and peanuts grew out back, and / moldin’ mud pies after cool spring rains.” The accompanying watercolor illustration presents young Bessie surrounded by roses. A head shot picture of George Coleman is included.
Each narrator, in chronological order, recalls anecdotes and stories to help readers get to know Coleman. A school teacher recalls a bright, determined girl, “When it came to knowledge, Bessie was a miser, / hoarding facts and figures like gold coins she was / saving up to spend on something special.” Elizabeth’s siblings remember a strong-minded sister who dreamed of a better life. After one brother jokes about airplanes and French women who are pilots, Bessie makes her mind up to be the first Colored woman in the world to fly. A newspaper publisher advises, “Go to Paris . . . French fliers are the best, / and they’ll teach anyone.” Later, a reporter records, “Bessie Coleman, aviatrix, could easily / have been a great actress on the stage.” The unique voices and characterizations help bring Bessie’s story to life in an interesting way. Grimes writes on the final page, “Bessie Coleman’s sturdy faith and determination to reach her goals challenge each of us to push beyond our limitations to pursue our own dreams.” (DD)

**Locomotion**

*Written by Jacqueline Woodson*


2004 Coretta Scott King Author Honor

Eleven-year-old Lonnie C. Motion, Locomotion for short, is writing to save his life. At least that’s what it feels like to him. He’s been living in foster care since both his parents died in a house fire, and he’s been separated from his younger sister, Lili, who has been placed in a different foster home. Lonnie is uncertain about what Miss Edna, his foster mother, thinks of him, and he has found that poetry gives him a clear focus for his undirected energy, as well as a reliable form for his mixed-up emotions. With the help of his teacher, Lonnie is able to turn all of his grief and pain into poetry, and along the way, he discovers he has both a talent and a need for writing. Writing poetry is a way for him to record what he observes and experiences in daily life, as well as to commemorate the bittersweet memories of life before the fire. Jacqueline Woodson makes the story accessible even to reluctant readers through her skillful use of both free verse and structured poetic forms as she creates a memorable character study of an African American boy breaking out of the past and into a future of his own making. Everything is in motion in this poignant, realistic story—from Lonnie himself to his emotions and relationships to his entire life. Lonnie’s story continues as a series of letters he writes his sister in *Peace, Locomotion* (Putnam, 2009). (KH)

**One Crazy Summer**

*Written by Rita Williams-Garcia*


2011 Coretta Scott King Author Award

After several young adult novels, Williams-Garcia’s first stab at middle grade fiction is an absolute gem. Sisters Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern are shipped from Brooklyn to Oakland during the summer of 1968 to spend time with their estranged mother, Cecile (“They need to know her, and she needs to know them,” (p. 43) says the girls’ pa). Not one for parental responsibility, Cecile, who hasn’t seen the girls in the seven years since she abandoned her family, sends them to a summer day camp run by the Black Panther Party. What was supposed to be a summer of Disneyland tours and trips to the beach turns out to be much more than the girls bargained for as they find themselves joining the Black Panther movement.

The sisters—ultra-responsible oldest sister Delphine, age 11; attention-hungry Vonetta, age 9; and baby-doll-toting Fern, age 7—are fantastically drawn characters with distinct (and authentic) personalities that are developed organically.
through Delphine’s strong first-person narrative. The book’s main strength lies in the relationship dynamics between the girls, and the complex and shifting connections they share with their mother. Cecile is never exactly lovable (and for the most part unlikable), but her gradual thaw toward her girls leads to one of the most stirring and memorable finales in recent years. Heartbreaking yet hopeful, this multi-award winner (also a National Book Award Finalist, Newbery Honor, and Scott O’Dell Award winner) surely is a nuanced and influential look at a pivotal period in African American history. (SB)

**The Road to Memphis**
Written by Mildred D. Taylor

1991 Coretta Scott King Author Award

Mildred D. Taylor’s incomparable saga of an African American family began with *Song of the Trees* (CSK Honor 1976) and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (CSK Honor, 1977) and continued with *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* (CSK Author winner, 1982). In this fourth installment of the family’s story, set in 1941, Cassie Logan is ready to start high school but must travel to Memphis, Tennessee, to do so since the public schools near her hometown do not educate African American students beyond the eighth grade. The three-day journey in her brother’s new car is fraught with danger and requires tremendous personal courage. For Cassie, the distance is more than just geographic because it is also her first trip away from the security of her loving rural Mississippi family.

Few choices existed then for most African Americans of that era, and we see the lack of options for these teens represented in the circumstances of Cassie and her fellow travelers; however, they did have the resources of a mid-twentieth century underground railroad of sorts—a network of trusted adults who could aid them in those times of segregation before public accommodations laws or other civil rights legislation. Taylor’s powerful narrative recreates the tensions and perils of that time and place. This historically accurate and emotionally authentic novel stands on its own for anyone unfamiliar with Taylor’s earlier works, but will have an even deeper resonance for those who have read the entire series. Other related works involving different generations of the same family and different points of view include *The Friendship* (CSK author winner, 1988), *Mississippi Bridge* (1990), *The Well* (1995), and *The Land* (CSK Author winner, 2002). (KH)

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