Sounds of Struggle…Songs of Freedom: Reflections on Our Theme

The sounds of struggle for freedom, equality, and justice begin with the struggle to end slavery. We marked the sorrowful 400th anniversary of the arrival of stolen, enslaved Africans on this continent last year. We noted then that full freedom for all is still not a fact of life in the US, and so the sounds of struggle continue. They are the cries of babies whose African American mothers die following childbirth at a shockingly high rate. They are the sounds of frustration of individuals caught in a system that denies their full humanity. They are the sounds of anger at the widespread denial that such a system persists. The legacies of slavery are still with us, and so the struggle to achieve freedom, equality, and justice is still our work to do.

We will hear freedom songs and other inspiring songs today because the music tells part of the story of African American history and the history of movements to dig out the white supremacist roots that hold our country back. With moving songs, powerful words, and courageous action, Dr. King and other freedom fighters show us that non-violent methods can bring the change we seek.

Our program book includes a list of books and other resources because education is a foundation for activism. History informs and inspires. Fiction provides mirrors and windows, in Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop’s terms, so we can see ourselves in stories and empathize with those who are different from us. Dr. Bishop and her colleagues encourage careful selection of books for children to avoid those that reinforce stereotypes. We do our best to follow her model in selecting children’s books for our list. Louise Lawarre, Vivian Rodgers, and Martha Viehmann contributed to this list.

BOOKS for CHILDREN

*In Your Hands* by Carole Boston Weatherford, illus. by Brian Pinkney (2017). This beautiful book is a mother’s prayer and dreams for her son. The mother holds the hand of her tiny newborn, her toddler learning to walk, her boy entering kindergarten, and “pours all the wisdom” she can into him. As the boy grows, she holds him in her heart and asks God to hold him in His hands. Her prayer grows with him as she dreams that he will receive forgiveness, find courage, and raise sons of his own. The book concludes with the assertions that black lives matter, your life matters, and with a final prayer that God’s hands hold her son. Ages 4 to 8.

*Seeds of Freedom: The Peaceful Integration of Huntsville, Alabama* by Hester Bass, illus. by E. B. Lewis (2015). Dignity, unity, creativity, and non-violent protest bring change to “Rocket City” where segregation and second class status for African Americans had long been “just the way it is.” Bass describes the protests and court battle that integrated public places, businesses, and schools in 1962 and 1963. Bass acknowledges that there is more work to do for freedom and writes this book in a way that allows children to imagine that they, too, can be activists. The “Author’s Note,” also appropriate for children, provides historical background. A list of sources allows adults to learn more about the civil rights movement in Huntsville. Bass’s choice to make the protestors largely anonymous makes that source important; we should know the names of the civil rights activists of Huntsville. Yet the largely anonymous, apparently ordinary protestors may make it easier for very young children to see themselves making a difference. Lewis’s water color illustrations have the realism of photographs. The colors, facial expressions, and details add much to the story. Ages 5 to 8.

*Memphis, Martin, and the Mountaintop: The Sanitation Strike of 1968* by Alice Faye Duncan, illus. by R. Gregory Christie (2018). Based on a woman’s memories of the Memphis sanitation strike, this picture book provides a well-rounded, age-appropriate introduction to the context of King’s last speech. Duncan shows how the unnecessary deaths of two men in a garbage truck accident and low pay inspired the strike, other unrest, and Dr. King’s visit to Memphis. Duncan shows children that their are peaceful ways to express deep feelings and to demand rights. Award-winning illustrator R. Gregory Christie uses both vibrant and subdued colors to show the range of emotions in this story of struggle, sorrow, and victory. Ages 9 to 12.

*Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer* by Carole Boston Weatherford, illus. by Ekua Holmes (2015). This is another terrific book by Weatherford, who makes Black history accessible to young readers in dozens of picture books. Weatherford weaves Hamer’s own words into this biography, which chronicles her early life as a sharecropper and her tireless work for freedom and opportunity once she learns that she has the right to vote and the right to demand fair treatment. Holmes’s illustrations are rich and powerful. The simple shapes and lines sometimes look like quilts, sometimes include hidden pictures, and often feature Hamer dressed in yellow, highlighting the light she brought to fighting for equal rights so that everyone could be free. Ages 10 to 13.

*March Forward, Girl: From Young Warrior to Little Rock Nine* by Melba Pattillo Beals (2018). The Little Rock Nine were the first students to integrate a high school in Arkansas’s capitol city, and Melba Pattillo was one of them. From the time she was three years old, she recognized that black people were treated as “less than.” Twenty short chapters illustrated with family photos and sketches by Frank Morrison tell about Ms. Beals’ childhood in a middle class, multi-generational family. Vivid details show a loving family, the strict rules for living in the segregated South, and the impact of Jim Crow on a young child and her self esteem. For years, Melba felt that “God was taking too long to improve things.” Finally, when she was in high school, Melba Pattillo got her chance to march forward and make her dreams of equality and opportunity come true. Ages 11 to 13.

*Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes (2018). A novel about a twelve year old from Chicago named Jerome Rogers who is shot by a police officer, who thought his toy gun was real. The story alternates between chapters about Jerome’s life the aftermath of his death, which he witnesses as a ghost. In death, Jerome connects with another Chicago teenager, Emmet Till. This fast-paced story will appeal to teens who are ready to grapple with difficult subjects. As Jerome’s grandmother says, “Can’t undo wrong, can only do our best to make things right.” Rhodes encourages teachers and parents to read this book with their teens and hopes that her novel will “prompt meaningful change for all youth.” This is a novel about bearing witness, about story-telling as a way to learn about the meaning of our experiences and our responsibility in the world. Jerome concludes his story with these words: “Only the living can make the world better. Live and make it better.” Ages 11 to 13.

BOOKS for TEENS & ADULTS

*Tell Me Who You Are: Sharing Our Stories of Race, Culture, and Identity* by Winona Guo and Priya Vulchi (2019). Two Asian American high school students from Princeton, NJ, were frustrated that honest conversations about race didn’t happen at school, where, instead, the ideals of equality were touted while messages of inferiority were clearly signaled. They knew too many white girls who couldn’t remember their names, they felt the pain of not matching white norms for being beautiful. When a teacher finally encouraged students to talk about race, Winona and Priya wanted more. They began asking anyone they met to tell their stories, they went into elementary schools to lead class discussions about experiencing or witnessing racism, and they wrote racial literacy curriculum, and still they wanted to do more. This book is the result. It stems from their six months of travels to every state to hear people’s stories about race, language, culture, and all the experiences that shape who we are. The book is divided into topical chapters and includes footnotes that define terms and provide context. The last chapter encourages readers to enrich their lives by starting conversations about race. The book also includes an extensive list of resources to learn about the many topics that touch people’s lives, from history to places and complex ideas like intersectionality.

BOOKS for ADULTS

*How to Be an Anti-Racist* by Ibram Kendi (2019). In How to Be an Anti-Racist Kendi continues his argument for a new way to look at racism/anti-racism that he began in his tome Stamped from the Beginning. While common talking points includes being “not racist” he asks, “What’s the problem with being “not racist?” He continues in his Introduction, “It is a claim that signifies neutrality: ‘I am not a racist, but neither am I aggressively against racism.’ But there is no neutrality in the racism struggle. The opposite of ‘racist’ isn’t ‘not racist.’ It is ‘anti-racist.’” Kendi challenges his readers to become anti-racist, “one who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions of expressing an antiracist idea.” In a series of chapters which also follow his personal growth along this path, he offers definitions and explanations that provide a clear way of thinking about racism and being an active participant in the work to end it.

*Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (2019). The story of the successes of Reconstruction and the terrible white backlash that followed are detailed in this amazing book by one of America’s outstanding scholars of African American history. The chapters of Stony the Road describe the hopeful years of Reconstruction and the rise of domestic terrorism that grew as the white backlash response called Jim Crow. Gates describes the brutal effects of disfranchisement and the twisting of the national image of black people through demeaning and often grotesque images and cartoons. Pages of color plates provide the reader with the visual effects of the propaganda. As Gates compares this historical period with our contemporary moment, we see that history can indeed repeat itself if we are not vigilant. He closes with a call “to heed Frederick Douglass’ admonition to Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!” because the progress made since the 1960s, especially at the ballot box, are “incomplete, and frighteningly vulnerable to reversal.”

*The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity* by Kwame Anthony Appiah (2018). Philosophical reflections on identity, why it matters, and its constantly shifting nature written for general readers by a scholar who teaches in the US and was raised in Ghana and London (that is an example of how national identity can be shifting and complex). His premise is that although we need to claim identities in order to forge community and a sense of belonging, none of those identities is fixed; all have a history and overlap with the opposites necessary to define gender, race, class, culture, belief, or national belonging. Appiah urges everyone to embrace the complexity of identity by recognizing that we all in fact have shared identities. A thought-provoking book meant to inspire conversations.

*Eyes On The Prize: America Civil Rights years 1954-1965* by Juan Williams (2013). This book is a must have for students and non-students alike. It chronicles the civil rights movement from the courts to the streets, to the halls of Congress. Details about the Montgomery Bus boycott, Brown v. Board of Education, the marches in Selma, the passing of the Voting Rights Bill and so much more provide a rich history. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and many other warriors were fed up with racial discrimination in this country and with their “eyes on the prize” set out to make a difference and did. The book features an introduction by Julian Bond and also contains many historical photographs.

*Race and the City: Work, Community, and Protest in Cincinnati, 1820-1970* edited by Henry Louis Taylor, Jr. (1993). In a series of well-researched articles, the authors cover 150 years of black life in Cincinnati. From the days of the Black Laws that controlled black lives in the antebellum years, through industrialization, the Great Migration, and into more recent events, this book offers tremendous insights into the lives of African Americans and the shape of racism in Cincinnati in a century and a half. Equally important, it shows how Cincinnati’s black citizens continuously met the challenges they faced, changing strategies and perspectives for each new set of problems and challenges.

*The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates (2019). Hiram Walker was born among “the Tasked,” Coates’ word in *The Water Dancer* for enslaved people. His mother had been sold when he was young, and he lost all memory of her. But he had gifts that helped and sustained him as he served his half-brother, the other son of the “Quality” family who owned the plantation. Coates, who grew up reading fantasy fiction, brings that influence to bear in one of Hiram’s special gifts – transporting people over long distance with an ability he calls “conduction.” As Hiram struggles to reach freedom in Philadelphia, he is also called to free others. In his fictional experiences he is helped by historical figures, most notably Harriet Tubman. Key to his development is his growing commitment not just to his own freedom but to free other people.

*No-No Boy* by John Okada (1956). A “no-no boy” is a Japanese-American who answered “no” when asked if he would serve in the US Army during WWII. Refusing to serve meant being sent to prison as a traitor, even though they were already locked up in internment camps. The novel is set in Seattle’s Japanese community in the post war era, and features a rich array of characters who face continued discrimination and struggle to figure out what it means to be Japanese and American in the aftermath of their diverse experiences during the war. An excellent introduction to the inner lives of Japanese immigrants and their children in this tense period of US history.

OTHER MEDIA

Film

*Reconstruction: America After the Civil War*, A PBS Film with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. The 4-hour documentary tells the real story of Reconstruction, a period in American history that is often ignored or misunderstood. It highlights the amazing steps newly-freed African Americans took to build their lives and communities, and take their place as leaders, and as elected representatives at all levels of government. But this bright period was thwarted by the return to power of white supremacist leaders of the South, and abandonment by the federal government. Yet throughout, African Americans fought for their right to claim their full personhood and call the country to live up to its ideals.

Podcasts

*1619.* The 400th anniversary of the arrival of stolen and enslaved Africans on the shore of Virginia prompted the New York Times to publish a collection of essays on the many aspects of American culture that have been shaped by slavery. The five episodes of this podcast explore politics, economics, music, healthcare, and property through a frame of personal stories.

*Flip the Script.* This podcast features interviews on a wide variety of topics related to race and health disparities. Researchers and MDs speak with a medical school student about the knowledge they are gaining from their studies, personal experiences, and best practices.

*Buried Truths*. Each season of this podcast features a Civil Rights era cold case murder, using court documents, historical background, and interviews with family members and others with a connection to each case. The 2018 season focuses on Isaiah Nixon, who was shot after he cast a ballot. The 2019 season is about a young man shot by the police in Macon, Georgia. A third season is expected in 2020.

*White Lies.* Another civil rights cold case podcast, White Lies focuses on the murder of Rev. Jim Reeb in Selma, Alabama, delving into the context and exploring its repercussions. Two journalists spend years combing through the files, interviewing anyone who will talk to them, and reflecting on lies, silence, and truth-telling. An accompanying website includes photographs and excerpts: <https://apps.npr.org/white-lies/>.

*This Land.* Cherokee journalist Rebecca Nagle introduces listeners to a 1999 homicide case that leads to arguments before the Supreme Court that will not only decide the fate of the man appealing the murder conviction but also the status of nearly half the land in the state of Oklahoma. Nagle traces the history of the southeastern tribes that were removed to Oklahoma and the convolutions of Indian law that impact jurisdiction over crimes in the territory of these Native Nations. An excellent introduction to the history and contemporary lives of Cherokee Nation and their neighbors.