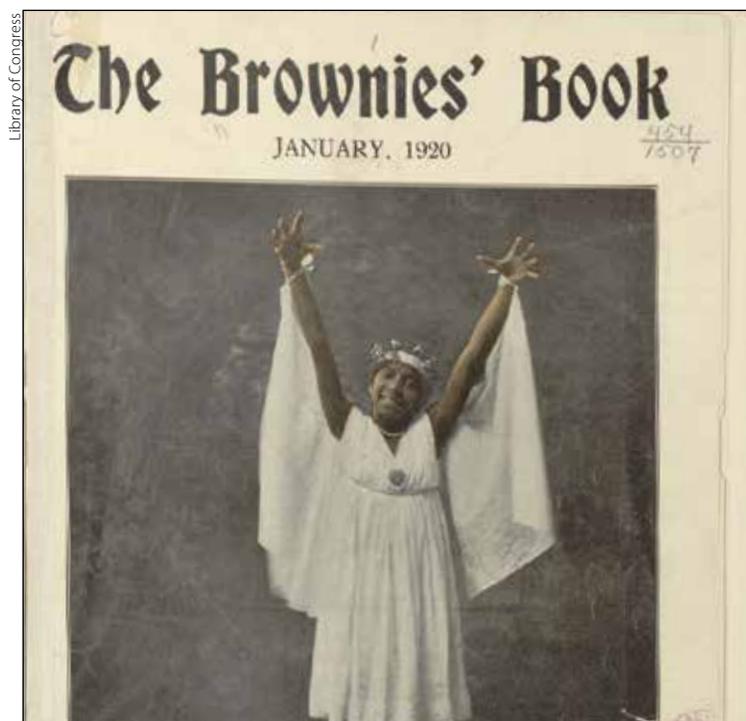


# A Polar Explorer, A Pilot, and a Pitcher: Black History in African American Children’s Literature

Jonda C. McNair

In 1920, W.E.B. Du Bois, Augustus Dill, and members of *The Crisis* staff published *The Brownies’ Book*, one of the first periodicals created primarily for African American children. In an article published in *The Crisis*, titled “The True Brownies,” seven goals were outlined for the magazine, two of which were to make Black children “familiar with the history and accomplishments of the Negro race” and to “make them know that other colored children have grown into useful, famous persons.”<sup>1</sup> Issues of *The Brownies’ Book* regularly contained biographies of famous African Americans such as Harriet Tubman, Benjamin Banneker, Crispus Attucks, and Phillis Wheatley. Though *The Brownies’ Book* was only in existence for two years, the goals of the publication continue to be of significance.<sup>2</sup> In many ways, *The Brownies’ Book* laid the foundation for African American children’s literature in terms of its ideological underpinnings.<sup>3</sup>

Carter G. Woodson, like W.E.B. Du Bois, sought to promote African American youth learning about their history. Woodson even published a book for elementary students, *Negro Makers of History* (1928),<sup>4</sup> as well as another for high school students, *The Negro in Our History* (1922).<sup>5</sup> Highlighting the accomplishments of African Americans continues to be a goal for many contemporary Black authors of children’s literature.<sup>6</sup> For example, Dolores Johnson writes about explorer Matthew Henson in *Onward: A Photobiography of African-American Polar Explorer Matthew Henson*<sup>7</sup>; Nikki Grimes focuses on pilot Bessie Coleman in *Talkin’ About Bessie: The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman*,<sup>8</sup> and in *A Strong Right Arm: The Story of Mamie “Peanut” Johnson*, Michelle Y. Green spotlights one of only three female pitchers in Negro League baseball history.<sup>9</sup> These three examples are just a sampling of many outstanding books about Black history. In this article, I identify notable books (with an emphasis on biographies) about African Americans and their accomplishments as well as a magazine about Black history. All books featured are written by African Americans. I also include some instructional strategies for responding to African American children’s literature.



## Recommended Books about Black History

*Bad News for Outlaws: The Remarkable Life of Bass Reeves, Deputy U.S. Marshal.* Vaunda Micheaux Nelson (Author) and R. Gregory Christie (Illustrator). (Carolrhoda, 2009; unpagged; Grades 4–6).<sup>10</sup> Born a slave in 1838, Bass Reeves became the first African American deputy U.S. marshal. He developed a reputation as a feared and respected lawman in the Indian Territory (mainly present-day Oklahoma), who arrested more than 3,000 people, including his own son (who was charged with murder), and once halted a lynching. Reeves could not read, but before going out to bring in outlaws, he would have the arrest warrants read to him, and “listened carefully and memorized the shapes of the letters for each name heard” as well as the charges against them.<sup>11</sup> The book features an actual photograph of Bass Reeves, a glossary of Western words (e.g., chuck wagon, desperado, and vittles), a timeline of his life, and suggested books and websites for more information.

*Before John Was a Jazz Giant: A Song of John Coltrane.* Carole Boston Weatherford (Author) and Sean Qualls (Illustrator). (Henry Holt, 2008; unpagged; Grades K-3). This engaging picturebook biography profiles some of the different sounds that John Coltrane heard growing up as a child. Some of these sounds included “hambones knocking in Grandma’s pots,” steam engines whistling past,” “Grandpa’s Sunday sermons” and “the sobs of kin-folk at family funerals.” The book concludes with an “Author’s Note,” a listing of books for more information about John Coltrane and a selection of some of his musical compositions. Another book related to music that might be of interest to middle-grade and high school students is *Rhythm Ride: A Road Trip through the Motown Sound* (2015), by Andrea Davis Pinkney.

*Best Shot in the West: The Adventures of Nat Love.* Patricia C. McKissack,

Fredrick L. McKissack, Jr. (Authors) and Randy DuBurke (Illustrator). (Chronicle, 2012, 130 pages; Grades 4–6 and 7–12). Told in graphic novel form, this is a biography of Nat Love, nicknamed Deadwood Dick, the most famous African American cowboy. The story is told through Nat’s eyes as a Pullman porter looking back on his earlier cowboy life.

*Bill Pickett: Rodeo-Ridin’ Cowboy.* Andrea Davis Pinkney (Author) and Brian Pinkney (Illustrator). (Gulliver Books/Harcourt, 1996; unpagged; Grades 4–6). This is a picturebook biography of “the most famous black rodeo performer who ever lived.” The book begins with Bill Pickett’s early life in Texas as a slave and ends with his death in 1932. Pickett was well-known for a technique called “bulldogging,” in which he would sink his teeth into the lips of steers, stunning them. Bill Pickett traveled all over the world performing in front of many famous people including King George V and Queen Mary. The book concludes with a section titled “More about Black Cowboys.” Readers who enjoy this biography might also enjoy others by Andrea Davis Pinkney such as *Ella Fitzgerald: The Tale of a Vocal Virtuosa* (2002), *Dear Benjamin Banneker* (1994), and *Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra* (1998).

*George Washington Carver.* Tonya Bolden (Author). (Abrams, 2008; 41 pages; Grades 4–6). This handsome picturebook biography details the life of the “Peanut Man,” beginning with his birth around the time of the Civil War and ending with his death in 1943, in Tuskegee, Alabama. The book is filled with photographs of Carver and people he interacted with, such as his teachers. It also has images of several of his drawings.

*Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans.* Kadir Nelson (Author and illustrator). (Balzer + Bray, 2011; 108 pages; Grades 4–6 and 7–12). “Most folks my age don’t speak much about the past. Sometimes it’s just too

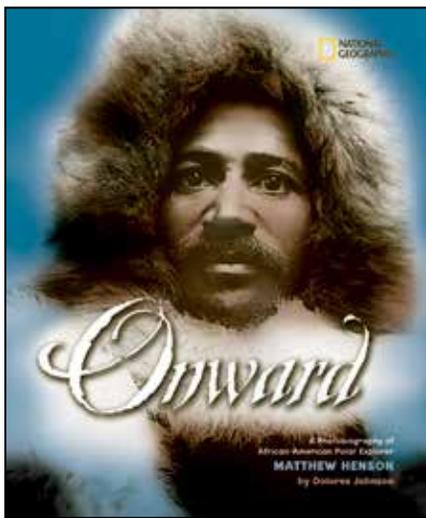
hard to talk about—nothing we like to share with you young folk.... Many of us are getting up in age and feel it’s time to make some things known before they are gone for good. So it’s important that you pay attention, honey, because I’m only going to tell you this story but once” (p. 7). And so begins this book in which a grandmotherly old woman recounts her life story, while integrating it with American and African American history. There are chapters that focus on slavery, abolition, the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Great Migration, and the innovations of African Americans such as Madam C.J. Walker, Lewis Latimer, and Elijah McCoy. The book ends with a painting of the old woman holding a button indicating she had voted for Barack Obama.

*Let It Shine: Stories of Black Women Freedom Fighters.* Andrea Davis Pinkney (Author) and Stephen Alcorn (Illustrator). (Gulliver Books/Harcourt, 2000; 107 pages; Grades 4–6 and 7–12). *Let It Shine* features 10 biographies of Black women who battled discrimination. There are profiles of well-known freedom fighters such as Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, and Sojourner Truth, but then there are also profiles of lesser-known figures including Biddy Mason, Ella Josephine Baker, and Dorothy Irene Height. Pair this book with another title by Andrea Davis Pinkney titled *Hand in Hand: Ten Black Men Who Changed America* (2012).

*March: Book One.* John Lewis, Andrew Aydin (Authors) and Nate Powell (Illustrator). (Top Shelf, 2013; 128 pages, Grades 7–12). This is a memoir, in graphic novel form, of John Lewis’s life as a civil rights leader. It begins with John Lewis reminiscing about his life before attending the 2009 inauguration of Barack Obama. *March: Book Two* focuses on Lewis’s time as a freedom rider. *Book 3*, the final title in the trilogy, ends Lewis’s personal account of the civil rights era and highlights pivotal events such as the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist

Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and the Freedom Summer murders.

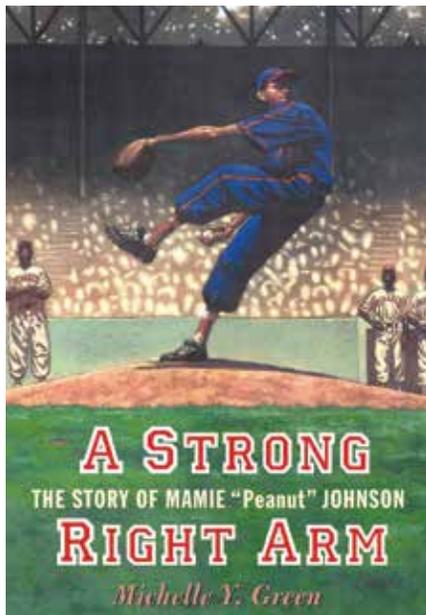
*Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom.* Carole Boston Weatherford (Author) and Kadir Nelson (Illustrator). (Jump at the Sun/Hyperion, 2006; unpagged, Grades 4–6). This book describes Harriet Tubman’s religious inspiration and dialogue with God as she made her first trip North alone, as a free woman in Philadelphia, and while rescuing others. In an “Author’s Note,” Carole Boston Weatherford notes that Harriet Tubman “saw visions and spoke to God.”



*Onward: A Photobiography of African-American Polar Explorer Matthew Henson.* Dolores Johnson (Author). (National Geographic Society, 2006; 64 pages; Grades 4–6 and 7–12). In this outstanding biography, Dolores Johnson details the life of Matthew Henson, beginning with his difficult childhood in Maryland and ending with his death, in 1955, at the age of 88, and the posthumous recognition of his life’s work. The book is filled with photographs of Henson, his travels, and his descendants.

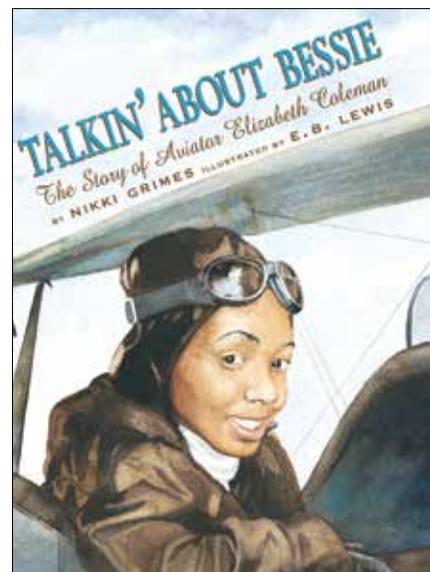
*Searching for Sarah Rector: The Richest Black Girl in America.* Tonya Bolden (Author). (Abrams, 2014; 76 pages; Grades 7–12). *Searching for Sarah Rector* is a fascinating story of an African American girl who was born in 1902 and who, by the age of 18, had a fortune of approximately \$1 million (the equivalent of \$11 million today). Sarah

Rector and her family were “black members of a nation of Indians commonly called Creeks” (p. 2). She received a land allotment from the United States government—a plot of land that turned out to be rich in oil deposits. The book is filled with interesting artifacts such as photos, maps, and legal documents. Another intriguing story about a Black girl living during the 1800s, also by Tonya Bolden, is *Maritcha: A Nineteenth-Century American Girl* (2005).



*A Strong Right Arm: The Story of Mamie “Peanut” Johnson.* Michelle Y. Green (Author). (Dial, 2002; 128 pages; Grades 4–6). “Mama never mentioned it, but I’m sure I musta been born with a ball in my hand, its smooth white skin curving into my tiny brown palm. Ever since I can remember ... my life has been wrapped up in that three-inch universe of twine and leather. It’s always been that way with me, and I expect it always will be” (p.3). Mamie “Peanut” Johnson tells her interesting life story in this engaging middle-grade novel. Born in Ridgeway, South Carolina, in 1945, she was one of only three females who played professional baseball, serving as a pitcher for the Negro League’s Indianapolis Clowns from 1953 to 1955. The book includes photographs of people such as her grandmother, uncle, and the legendary Satchel Paige, who taught Mamie how to throw

a curveball. For more information about him, read *Satchel Paige* (2000) by Lesa Cline-Ransome.



*Talkin’ About Bessie: The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman.* Nikki Grimes (Author) and E.B. Lewis (Illustrator). (Orchard, 2002; unpagged, Grades 4–6 and 7–12). The setting for this book is a funeral parlor on the South Side of Chicago where people have gathered to mourn for Elizabeth Coleman, who died following a tragic flying accident. It features free verse poems, grounded in biographical information, written from the perspectives of various people in her life, such as her mother, father, sister, a flight instructor, and a news reporter. Elizabeth Coleman was the first African American female to become a licensed pilot.

*28 Days: Moments in Black History That Changed the World.* Charles R. Smith (author) and Shane W. Evans (illustrator). (Roaring Brook Press, 2015; unpagged; Grades 3–12). This book highlights 28 events (e.g., the *Dred Scott* decision, Bessie Coleman receiving her pilot’s license, Marian Anderson’s performance at the Lincoln Memorial, the *Forbes* magazine declaration in 2003 of Oprah Winfrey as the world’s first Black female billionaire, etc.) that have significantly impacted Black history. It begins in 1770 with the shooting of Crispus Attucks and ends with the inauguration of Barack Obama

as president in 2009. Other African Americans mentioned throughout the book include Daniel Hale Williams, Shirley Chisholm, Matthew Henson, Harriet Tubman, Wilma Rudolph, and Thurgood Marshall.

*Underground: Finding the Light to Freedom.* Shane W. Evans (Author and illustrator). (Macmillan, 2012; unpagged, Grades K-3). *Underground* is a book about a family of slaves traveling along the Underground Railroad to freedom. The book begins, “The darkness./The escape./We are quiet./The fear./We run./We crawl./We rest.” The minimal text presents this difficult topic in a way that is accessible for young children.

*We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball.* Kadir Nelson (Author and illustrator). (Jump at the Sun/Hyperion, 2010; 88 pages; Grades 4–6 and 7–12). *We Are the Ship* is a non-fiction book focusing on Negro League baseball starting with its beginnings in the 1920s. The nine chapters are labeled as “innings,” and they highlight various topics such as Negro League game play, Negro League owners, Negro League all-stars, and Jackie Robinson. This literary gem features majestic paintings—some of which are foldout pages of entire baseball teams in uniform. *We Are the Ship* was a recipient of both the Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal and the Coretta Scott King Book Award.

## Responding to Literature

When reading aloud children’s books, there are general methods of responding to literature that are appropriate. For example, asking students open-ended questions such as “What does this story make you think about?” or “What was your favorite part and why?” will allow them to respond in personal and thoughtful ways. Students can answer these questions verbally or through writing in response journals. Try and avoid questions such as “Did you like the book?” since it does not require as much thought to simply respond “yes” or “no.” KWL charts are also effective ways to use nonfiction books. Students can note on

charts or discuss what they already know (K) about a topic, what they would (W) like to know, and what they learned as a result of reading (L) certain nonfiction books. Please note that with longer nonfiction titles that are content-heavy, it is not always appropriate to read an entire book at one time. It is fine to read a single book over a period of time.

Also, for children in the primary and elementary grades, drawing in response to literature is a good way to allow them to express themselves and their feelings about books. Drawing pictures can be a good way to support children in responding orally since they can describe their drawings and the details within them. Note the two responses created by second graders after having read *Before John Was a Jazz Giant: A Song of John Coltrane*. Allowing students to listen to the music of artists like John Coltrane and Duke Ellington after reading their biographies is one manner in which to extend the reading. Students can draw pictures in response to the music and how it makes them feel. Students could also adapt texts and create and read aloud readers theatre scripts. A book like *Talkin’ About Bessie* lends itself well to allowing students to take on the role of the different people who shared their memories of Elizabeth Coleman at the funeral parlor.

## Conclusion

It is my sincere hope that librarians, teacher educators, teachers, and students of all races and ethnicities will read these books throughout the year—not just during Black History Week or Month. The books recommended in this column demonstrate that African American children’s literature and Black history can be easily integrated into a wide range of units of study such as cowboys, music, aviation, and sports. Carter G. Woodson recognized the need to acknowledge and learn about the contributions of African Americans to our country. There is so much to be studied that it is simply not possible to do this effectively in one week or month. 🌍

## Notes

1. W.E.B. Du Bois, “The True Brownies,” *The Crisis* 18 (1919): 285-286. *The Crisis* is the official publication of the NAACP.
2. The remaining five goals mentioned in 1919 in *The Crisis* article titled “The True Brownies” were “To make colored children realize that being colored is a normal, beautiful thing; To teach them delicately, a code of honor and actions in their relations with white children; To turn their little hurts and resentments into emulation, ambition and love of their own homes and companions; To point out the best amusements and joys and worthwhile things of life; To inspire them for definite occupations and duties with a broad spirit of sacrifices.”
3. Rudine Sims Bishop, *Free Within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children’s Literature* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2007).
4. Carter G. Woodson, *Negro Makers of History* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1928).
5. Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro in Our History* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1922).
6. Jonda C. McNair, “A Comparative Analysis of *The Brownies’ Book* and Contemporary African American Children’s Literature Written by Patricia C. McKissack,” in *Embracing, Evaluating and Examining African American Children’s and Young Adult Literature*, eds. Wanda M. Brooks and Jonda C. McNair. (Lanham, Md. Scarecrow Press, 2008): 3–29.
7. Dolores Johnson, *Onward: A Photobiography of African-American Polar Explorer Matthew Henson* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 2006).
8. Nikki Grimes, *Talkin’ About Bessie: The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman* (New York, Orchard, 2002).
9. Michelle Y. Green, *A Strong Right Arm: The Story of Mamie “Peanut” Johnson* (New York: Dial, 2002).
10. The term “unpagged” means that the book is not paginated and does not contain actual numbers on the pages throughout the books. This is usually the case for picture books. It should also be noted that the grade levels suggested for all book titles are estimates and that it is possible for children (in 2nd or 3rd grade, for example) who are not able to read a book intended for students in grades 4–6 to comprehend it if it is read aloud to them. It is also possible to share picture books with students in grades 7–12. Teachers should also use their own judgment.
11. V.M. Nelson, *Bad News for Outlaws: The Remarkable Life of Bass Reeves, Deputy U.S. Marshal*. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Carolrhoda, 2009).

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