

Fifty Years Strong

The Coretta Scott King Award and Its Enduring Impact

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CSK: 50 Years Strong

ALSC joins ALA's Ethnic & Multicultural Information Exchange Round Table (EMIERT), administrators of the Coretta Scott King Book Awards, in celebrating the award's fiftieth anniversary. The award recognizes outstanding African American authors and artists of children's books who demonstrate an appreciation of black culture and universal values.

The road to CSK 50 Years Strong began in 1969 out of a fortuitous chat at the ALA Annual Conference in Atlantic City, NJ, between two school librarians—Glyndon Flynt Greer, of Englewood, NY, and Mabel R. McKissick, of New London, CT. They discussed the absence of African American authors and illustrators on the list of winners of the two most eminent awards in the field of children's literature.

Their conversation was overheard by publisher John Carroll of Carroll Books Services who suggested, “Why don't you ladies establish your own award?”

The trio envisioned an award that would recognize the talents of outstanding African American authors and encourage them to continue writing books for children and young adults. And today, many African American authors and illustrators would not have been recognized had it not been for these trailblazing founders.



A humbling moment shared by Congressman John Lewis, who won the 2017 CSK Award—among scores of other accolades—for his book *March: Book Three*.

The first Coretta Scott King Book Award, recognizing an author, was presented in 1970 at the New Jersey Library Association conference in Atlantic City. The award went to Lillie Patterson, author of *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Man of Peace*.

Four years later, the committee, selected by Greer, honored an illustrator for the first time—George Ford for his acrylic painted illustrations of *Ray Charles* by Sharon Bell Mathis (who also won the CSK author award). As the first illustrator award recipient, Ford said it was “totally unexpected.



Dr. Claudette S. McLinn is Chair of the Coretta Scott King Book Awards Committee. She is Executive Director of the Center for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature (CSMCL) in Inglewood, CA.



Among other honors, Jason Reynolds won the 2015 John Steptoe Award for New Talent the year his book *When I Was the Greatest* was published. Two of his 2016 books received CSK honors: *All American Boys* and *The Boy in the Black Suit*.

Although the award was a recognition of artistic excellence, I was most proud of the fact that it was a reward specifically intended as a source of inspiration and encouragement to African American children.”¹

That same year, Lev Mills, an internationally renowned artist from Atlanta, GA, designed the Coretta Scott King seal to identify book jackets of award winners.

Over the years, some of today’s most notable authors and illustrators have been recognized—and it has impacted their careers greatly. Just ask Bryan Collier, 2001 CSK Illustrator Award winner for *Uptown*, which he also authored. He said, “I went door to door to nearly every publishing house in New York once a week for seven years in search of a book deal. For my very first book, *Uptown*, I received a CSK Medal, a few months later I was offered ten book deals from four different publishers.”²

After receiving her first award, a 1984 CSK Author Honor for her book *Because We Are*, Mildred Pitts Walter said, “Winning the Coretta Scott King Award affected my career, I believe greatly. It gave me confidence that perhaps I was a writer. After that award I received [many] awards [and recognitions].”³



Attendees of the 2002 Coretta Scott King Book Awards Breakfast join in song at ALA Annual in Atlanta, Georgia.

Noted illustrator and multiple award winner Jerry Pinkney said, “I received my first CSK Award in 1981 for *Count on Your Fingers African Style*. At that time, my creative and artistic practice was not entirely focused on bookmaking. I was also new to the publishing community and did not yet understand the mission of the CSK Awards and its taskforce (now called the Coretta Scott King Book Awards Committee).

“However, I was able to take in and fully appreciate the fact that the illustrations for my thirty-second book were noted as deserving of special attention, and it was beyond gratifying—a green light to pursue what would become my primary way of expressing my passion for making pictures: children’s literature. It became a springboard for me to introduce children to what was often their first experience with art, and my intent from the beginning was to entertain and at the same time spark curiosity in young readers.”⁴

Other CSK winners and honor award-winning authors and illustrators have expressed the impact the award had on their careers. Vaunda Micheaux Nelson said, “After being honored with a 2010 CSK Author Award for *Bad News for Outlaws: The Remarkable Life of Bass Reeves, Deputy U.S. Marshal*, it felt like I had been admitted to a special club. My work became widely recognized in the children’s book world. I began receiving more invitations to speak, and readers and publishers were asking what I was working on next. I’m humbled to say my work has been honored with other awards since.”⁵

Nonfiction author Tonya Bolden calls winning a CSK honor (in 2006 for *Maritcha: A Nineteenth-Century American Girl*) a “huge hug to my heart, mighty wind beneath my wings . . . more teachers and librarians began to take notice of my work . . . in the thirteen years since *Maritcha*, I have received many honors and awards for subsequent books.”⁶

Renée Watson, 2018 winner for *Piecing Me Together*, said, “Receiving my first CSK Award was such an honor. The award brought visibility to my work and introduced my writing to

educators and young people who hadn't read my previous books. But more importantly, for me personally, the award validated that little girl in me who spent hours in the public library tracing my finger along the 'sticker books' dreaming of having my own one day."⁷

Multiple award-winning author Jason Reynolds was awarded the 2015 John Steptoe Award for New Talent—the first award he ever won, he said.

"It forced my book (*When I Was the Greatest*), and furthermore, my name into the conversation of new writers at that time. I'm not so sure I wouldn't have slipped through the

cracks if Coretta Scott King committee hadn't recognized my work.

"Furthermore, I had a chance to give a speech in front of a room full of librarians and bibliophiles which was another opportunity to stake my claim and say, 'I'm here.' To announce that I had a voice and an unwavering commitment to this work. For that, I'll forever be grateful.

"After the CSK, I went on to win many others. But it all began with the recognition from the Coretta Scott King committee—the first stamp of approval."⁸ &

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References

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