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BLACK HISTORY

BY ROBIN SMITH

OVERCOMING THE ODDS IN STORIES OF INSPIRATION

Just when I think there are no more stories to be written about African Americans in history, I am blown away by new and inspiring books. Each of these beautiful picture books tells a story of perseverance in the face of overwhelming obstacles.

THE LIGHT OF LITERACY

Most folks know that it was against the law for slaves to learn to read, but it's clear that some were able to learn despite the prohibition. How did they do it? In **Light in the Darkness** (Jump at the Sun, \$16.99, 40 pages, ISBN 9781423134954) author Lesa Cline-Ransome and her husband, illustrator James E. Ransome, tell the story of pit schools—large holes dug deep in the ground where slaves would meet and learn from a literate slave, usually at night. The book's dark blue palette is perfect for showing the fear of the slaves, hidden in the hole while patrollers are about. One especially chilling spread shows a slave being whipped—one lash for every letter she had learned. It's impossible not to be inspired by the book's portrayal of enslaved people and their dedication to learning.

A DRAMATIC RESCUE

Another husband-and-wife team, Judith Bloom Fradin and Dennis Brindell Fradin, bring us a tale of stubbornness and bravery in **The Price of Freedom: How One Town Stood Up to Slavery** (Walker, \$16.99, 48 pages, ISBN 9780802721662). Stirring told by the authors and beautifully illustrated by Eric Velasquez, this is the story of John Price, an escaped slave sheltered by Quakers in Oberlin, Ohio, in 1858. The Fugitive Slave Act allowed slave catchers from the South to legally capture slaves and return them to their owners. When John was recaptured and imprisoned by slave catchers in a hotel in nearby Wellington while they waited for a train south, news of the capture spread. Hundreds of Oberlinians—students, teachers, shopkeepers and more—raced to rescue Price. And they did! Thirty-seven members of the town were eventually accused of violating the Fugitive Slave Act and jailed for three months. A moving archival photo of the rescuers adds much to the story. More people will now know of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue, thanks to this dramatic book.

DREAMS FULFILLED

In **Fifty Cents and a Dream** (Little, Brown, \$16.99, 48 pages, ISBN 9780316086578) Jabari Asim and illustrator Bryan Collier depict the early life of educator and writer Booker T. Washington. Collier's collage and watercolor illustrations are perfect for detailing the struggles the young man overcame to attend Hampton Institute and eventually to lead the new Tuskegee Institute. One particularly moving painting shows Washington kneeling in prayer while the trees are filled with images of slaves, symbols of his older neighbors who told him their stories. "Booker listened, and carried their dreams with him." The backmatter—timeline, author's and illustrator's notes and bibliography—add depth to this emotional tale.

SEEING RED

Perhaps my favorite new book of the season is **A Splash of Red: The Life and Art of Horace Pippin** (Knopf, \$17.99, 40 pages, ISBN 9780375867125). Jen Bryant and illustrator Melissa Sweet, who partnered on *A River of Words: The Story of William Carlos Williams*, team up again with the tender tale of artist Horace Pippin. His story is one of dedication, loss and determination to create art. Using his own words as part of the design, Sweet's gouache, collage and watercolor paintings tell of the boy who answered the call of his friends and neighbors, "Make a picture for us, Horace!" As Bryant recounts the triumphant

day when Pippin won a magazine drawing contest, the reader can feel the excitement he must have felt when the prize of pencils, paints and brushes arrived. Now he could add his trademark splash of red. His life, which was filled with challenges, including a shoulder injury suffered in World War I, was not an easy one. Bryant and Sweet portray Pippin with honesty and heart, introducing this true American artist to a new generation. The back cover shows paints and brushes and includes a final quote from Pippin: "Pictures just come to my mind . . . and I tell my heart to go ahead." Stunning.

HISTORY REVEALED

Kadir Nelson's gifts as an artist are on full view in **I Have a Dream** (Schwartz & Wade, \$18.99, 32 pages, ISBN 9780375858871). Words from the famous 1963 speech by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. are interspersed with Nelson's soaring paintings of the March on Washington and portraits of Dr. King in front of the Lincoln Memorial. This is no simplistic rehashing of the familiar words. Each page turn brings a new, glorious image celebrating one of the most important speeches of the 20th century.

