

Coretta  
Scott  
King  
Award  
Books

**DISCUSSION GUIDE**

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# Coretta Scott King Award Books

DISCUSSION GUIDE

*Pathways to Democracy*

by Adelaide Poniatowski Phelps and Carole J. McCollough

*Office for Literacy and Outreach Services and ALA Editions*



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# Foreword

The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically . . . Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.

—Martin Luther King, Jr., 1947

**D**EMOCRACY AND ITS CORE VALUES HAVE MORPHED OVER the centuries just as the function of education has evolved. My personal educational philosophy is situated in the Head Start movement of the late 1960s, in itself a movement toward democratic values. I was a college student, soon to become a teacher. My introduction to the program was a week's training on working with Appalachian children. Although the vast majority of children we served were African American, there was no training aimed at working with them.

Over the next few years, I learned little about diversity and equality—or inequality, for that matter. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, Bobby Kennedy was killed, Vietnam raged on, and education trudged on. In some U.S. cities, changes appeared gradually, but we only have to examine the inequality in post-Katrina New Orleans to see that the core values of democracy continue to be suppressed in much of American education.

How do we expect the situation to improve? One effective strategy that can achieve permanent change is to allow children to explore, study, understand, and eventually integrate the democratic values into their

everyday lives. To do this, children must be exposed at home and at school; values must be taught, encouraged, and modeled on a daily basis. What are the core democratic values that enable children to mature into responsible citizens? As the authors of this book explain, core democratic values include *a dynamic sense of community, history, and social responsibility*.

Martin Buber (as cited in Guccione, 2011) distinguishes between objectifying students as data—scores on a test—and creating a relationship between students and teachers or teachers and administrators. His “I-it” and “I-thou” philosophy can illuminate the ideals contained in the core democratic values. Buber advocates teachers who establish relationships with students as colearners, viewing each student as a person who has value and can bring worthwhile skills and knowledge to each learning experience. Current educational journals and blogs are abuzz with articles and opinions about the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). When we standardize all curriculum, we objectify students—whether preschool or postgraduate—as we might sort widgets. The assumption is that all students learn the same way at the same speed and will perform equally on standardized tests. This philosophy does not value the individual student, nor does it recognize the cultural knowledge and skills students bring to the classroom. It is the opposite of Buber’s ideals.

I do not mean that improving curriculum and learning expectations is wrong. The theory behind the CCSS is solid. However, as we say, the devil is in the details. Unless teachers and administrators understand how to integrate the core democratic values into the Common Core State Standards, we will continue to graduate students who know little about their duties and responsibilities as citizens of the world.

What are core democratic values? A democratic core curriculum “involves not only common knowledge but also the values and processes of the democratic way of life” (Beane, 2002, p. 27). According to Beane, this involves integrating self-interest and the common good, valuing diversity, asking powerful questions, and doing real work. If all of these occur, students will meet the rigorous standards that are called for in the CCSS and will “learn to respect one another, contribute to the group, and build a community in the classroom” (Beane, 2002, p. 28).

Depending on the age and level of education, the explanation of essential democratic values can be simplified or expanded. Most of these values come directly from the U.S. Constitution, its amendments, and the Bill of Rights. Themes include the following core democratic values:

- **Equality**—everyone has an opportunity to achieve.
- **Pursuit of happiness**—individuals can pursue happiness without impeding others' quest for happiness.
- **Rule of law**—people show obedience and respect for authority.
- **The common good**—cooperation so that all people can succeed.
- **The right to life**—inviolable except in extreme cases defined by law.

Adelaide Phelps and Carole McCollough have provided a road map to help teachers and librarians incorporate values lessons into read-aloud sessions or book club discussions. They include focal and supplemental books that are suited for young children up to high school seniors. Both Phelps and McCollough have served on the Coretta Scott King Book Awards jury, with McCollough having also served as its chair. Their meticulous reading of Coretta Scott King Award books, as well as Pura Belpré, Newbery, Caldecott, and other Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) award-winning books offers librarians and teachers a treasury of discussion topics, books, and questions that will challenge readers to think deeply and broadly about their responsibility as a citizen.

John Dewey, one of the twentieth century's greatest proponents of education for democratic values, wrote:

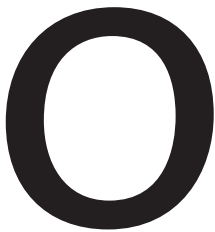
All the aims and values which are desirable in education are themselves moral. Discipline, natural development, culture, social efficiency are moral traits—marks of a person who is a worthy member of that society which it is the business of education to further. (John Dewey, 1916)

Linda M. Pavonetti, EdD  
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Vice-President, International Board on Books for Young People

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# Introduction



**OUR GOAL FOR THIS BOOK WAS TO TAKE THE DISCUSSION** guides created by the Coretta Scott King (CSK) Book Awards jury for each year's award and expand this resource to create a handbook useful to educators, librarians, parents, and other child caregivers. We did not include every Coretta Scott King Award book.

We reviewed every winner, honor, and John Steptoe title and evaluated them based on appropriateness as they relate to the core democratic values, rather than by subject or theme. We chose core democratic values as a way to frame these discussions, using a Socratic approach, assuming the understanding that rules are essential for avoiding total chaos. The interpretation of rules depends on the perspective of those affected by the rules. Coretta Scott King Award books provide a venue for discussing pathways toward a better understanding of what these rules and their accompanying responsibilities mean.

We embarked on a search to identify within the plot, character, and themes of CSK-winning titles those values that relate to being an American citizen in a democratic society. It soon became clear that most if not all of the CSK titles embodied the responsible decision making that is integral to living in a constitutional democracy. The decision was made

to use the Socratic method of discussion to highlight core democratic values. Our hope is to expand the utility of this body of literature by and about African Americans to a broader audience for a deeper purpose.

In a democratic society, responsibility plays an important role. So, if we focus on the core democratic value of pursuit of happiness, for example, trust and truth telling are important aspects of that pursuit. For children in K–4, *Storm in the Night* by Mary Stolz, illustrated by Pat Cummings, offers opportunities to discuss these aspects of the pursuit of happiness.

If we think broadly about the pursuit of happiness and look at the various ways that teens pursue this happiness, Alice Childress's *Rainbow Jordan* offers many opportunities for discussion. Compare it with Sharon Draper's *Forged by Fire, Tears of a Tiger*, or Virginia Hamilton's *Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush*. View the same titles with a focus on right to life, and the perspective will be entirely different. This makes the Coretta Scott King Award books essential to discussions about developing a strong sense of citizenship.

Core democratic values inform our discussions of CSK titles. They complement the theme of a book while not necessarily relating specifically to the subject area of the book. They are basic to both American and global perspectives and include the foundations and values of life in a democratic society. CSK authors speak from a variety of perspectives. Respect for others, responsibility, citizenship, honesty, trustworthiness, community awareness, and fairness: these are the underlying principles of American society. They are expressed in the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. They embody fundamental beliefs in life, liberty, pursuit of happiness, common good, justice, equality, diversity, truth, popular sovereignty, and patriotism, along with the constitutional principles of rule of law, separation of powers, representative government, checks and balances, individual rights, freedom of religion, federalism, and civilian control of the military.

Life in a democratic society is heavily laced with responsible decision making. Coretta Scott King books present multiple opportunities to explore aspects of core democratic values as themes. CSK books expand the limited view about African American lives with a depth not previ-

ously explored, thereby moving our thinking toward what it means to live in a democratic society. This includes privileges, responsibilities, and a dynamic sense of community and history.

As we examined each individual title, we determined that several CSK titles from the 1970s and 1980s were either not available or were inappropriate for our stated purposes. We looked at the themes and the complementary core democratic values and developed “Content Perspectives” that reflect these values. “Discussion Openers” focus on a particular aspect of the title as a starting point.

“Beyond the Book” addresses the ‘thinking piece’ or starting point for understanding how youth literature provides pathways to successful living through a better understanding of universal values. CSK Award books can help youth readers work through daily issues and concerns while inviting them to view the larger picture of living in a democratic society.

In “Books for Further Discussions,” we selected books again based on appropriateness as they related to the core democratic values, including Newbery, Caldecott, Pura Belpre, Sibert, Schneider, Jane Addams, and American Indian Award books, as well as books that did not win an award. This approach allowed us to remain focused on a pathway toward discussions about what it means to be a good citizen.

We started this project with a focus on core democratic values. We took titles from each award year and determined if, how, and where the core democratic values applied. Coretta Scott King Award books emphasize these values. What it means to be a citizen in a democratic society is at the core of this project. We see this effort as an opportunity to open discussions about important aspects of citizenship—both privileges and responsibilities—that are often overlooked. This includes a dynamic sense of community, history, and social responsibility. We want to move Coretta Scott King Award books from the limited view of celebrating African American life into the broader perspective of daily democratic living and into the global realm.



# Grades K–3

## The Bat Boy & His Violin

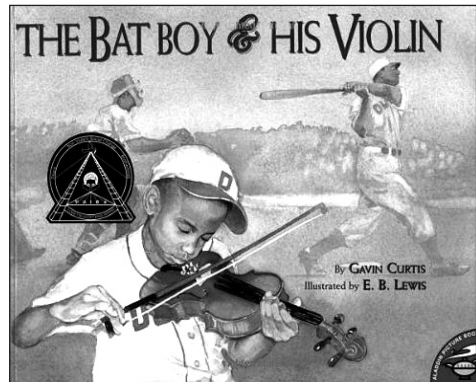
By Gavin Curtis,  
illus. by E. B. Lewis  
N.Y., Simon & Schuster, 1998

**Grade:** K–3

**Genre:** Fiction/Picture Book

**Core Democratic Value:** Liberty

*Follow your beliefs and let  
others follow theirs.*



### Content Perspective

Reginald wants to practice his violin for an upcoming recital in church. His dad, who happens to be the manager of the Negro League team the Dukes, insists that he travel with the team as a bat boy. Watercolor paintings by E. B. Lewis bring a perspective that combines the two diverse story elements of sports masculinity and musical sensitivity. Reginald manages to continue his pursuit of musical excellence while at the same time awakening an unexpected music appreciation from the team players.

## Discussion Openers

Students should provide examples of text and/or illustrations to support their responses.

- Look at each of the pictures of Reginald playing the violin. Notice that his eyes are closed. Why do you suppose that is?
- Why is it important to Reginald that his father not call his violin a fiddle?
- Find the picture of the Dukes in front of the bus. How do you know what the men were thinking or feeling?
- Talk about the way Papa thinks about Reginald playing the violin. Describe how Papa's feelings changed.
- How did Reginald respond to his father's love of baseball?
- How did the players respond to Reginald's music?

## Beyond the Book

- Ask an elder in your family if he or she can tell you anything about the Negro Baseball League.
- Retell the story, emphasizing the key details.
- Ask your teacher to help you find a Schubert sonata; listen to it with your classmates.
- What special skill or talent would you like to have?
- In this story, all of the characters got what they wanted: Reginald's father got his son to become a bat boy; the players got a new musical awareness; Reginald got to practice for his upcoming recital. How did that happen?

## Books for Further Discussions

- *Catching the Moon: The Story of a Young Girl's Baseball Dream* by Crystal Hubbard, illus. by Randy DuBurke. Lee & Low, 2005.
- *Mighty Jackie: The Strike Out Queen* by Marissa Moss, illus. by C. F. Payne. Simon & Schuster, 2004.
- *Violet's Music* by Angela Johnson, illus. by Laura Huliska-Beith. Dial, 2004.
- *What Charlie Heard* by Mordicai Gerstein. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.

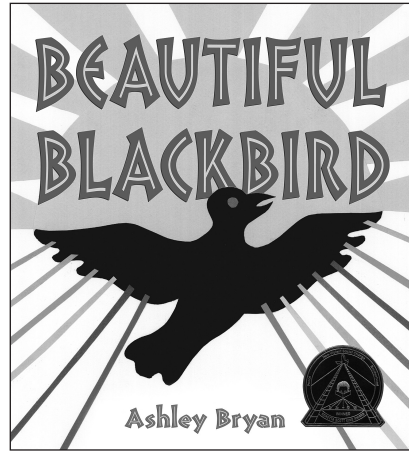
# Beautiful Blackbird

By Ashley Bryan  
N.Y., Atheneum, 2003

**Grade:** K-3

**Genre:** Folktale/Picture Book

**Core Democratic Value:** Diversity  
*Work and play with everyone.*



## Content Perspective

Ringdove and all the forest birds proclaim Blackbird the most beautiful of them all. In keeping with Ringdove's request, Blackbird adorns his fellow birds with touches of his blackening brew. His task complete, Blackbird advises, "Color on the outside is not what's on the inside . . . Whatever I do, I'll be me and you'll be you." Ashley Bryan's message of self-acceptance and tolerance—and the often repeated "Black is beautiful. Uh-huh!"—emphasizes that beauty comes from within.

## Discussion Openers

Students should provide examples of text and/or illustrations to support their responses.

- Beautiful Blackbird shared some of his color with all of the other birds. How did it make the other birds feel? How did it make Beautiful Blackbird feel?
- What did Beautiful Blackbird mean when he said: "Just remember, whatever I do, I'll be me and you'll be you"?
- Why did the other birds think that Blackbird was the most beautiful of all?
- What made Beautiful Blackbird a good friend to all the other birds?
- Reread the last page and discuss how the birds felt about Beautiful Blackbird for sharing his color.

## Beyond the Book

- How can sharing contribute to happiness?
- When you share something how does it make you feel?
- How would you respond if someone asked you to share your lunch?  
Would you respond differently if they asked you to share your candy?
- Using colorful paper, create your own collage of birds and tell their story.
- Go on a nature hike and describe all the birds that you see and hear.

## Books for Further Discussions

*Brown Honey in Broomwheat Tea* by Joyce Carol Thomas, illus. by Floyd Cooper. HarperCollins, 1993. (CSK Honor)

*Just in Case* by Yuyi Morales. Roaring Brook, 2008. (Pura Belpre Winner/Honor)

*My Family Plays Music* by Judy Cox, illus. by Elbrite Brown. Holiday House, 2003. (CSK–John Steptoe Winner)

*The Patchwork Quilt* by Valerie Flournoy, illus. by Jerry Pinkney. Dial, 1985. (CSK Winner)

*Uncle Jed's Barbershop* by Margaree King Mitchell, illus. by James Ransome. Simon & Schuster, 1993. (CSK Honor)

# Black Cat

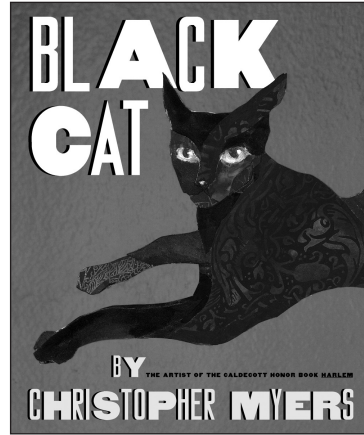
By Christopher Myers  
N.Y., Scholastic, 1999

**Grade:** K-3

**Genre:** Fiction/Picture Book

**Core Democratic Value:** Diversity

*Work and play with everyone.*



## Content Perspective

Black Cat roams the New York landscape paying homage to the diverse environment of commercial and residential structures, playgrounds, street trash, subway rodents, and basketball courts. *Black Cat* is creatively illustrated with a unique combination of cut paper, photographs, paint, and random found street items. It celebrates the variety experienced in city neighborhoods.

## Discussion Openers

Students should provide examples of text and/or illustrations to support their responses.

- Compare Black Cat’s neighborhood to your own. What is the same? What is different?
- Which places did Black Cat go that seemed the most dangerous? Why? Are there places in your neighborhood that might be dangerous?
- Which places did Black Cat visit that seemed the most exciting? Why?
- Find five new or unfamiliar words and look up their dictionary meanings.
- Answer the questions, “Where is your home; where do you go?”
- Explain what is meant by “throwing shadows and tags on graffiti-covered walls.”

# About the Authors

**Adelaide Poniowski Phelps** has a master's degree in library and information science from Wayne State University in Detroit and a second master's degree in English literature from Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. She is the recently retired coordinator of the Educational Resources Lab in the School of Education and Human Services at Oakland University and a former lecturer in children's literature for the reading department there. She is a member of the Coretta Scott King Book Awards Committee and served two terms (2007–2008) on the awards jury. In addition, she was a reviewer for the journal *Multicultural Review*; a contributing reviewer for the fourth edition of *The Coretta Scott King Awards 1970–2009* book, edited by Henrietta M. Smith; a contributing author for the article (2008), "Weaving the Threads of Diversity: A School of Education's Reflection on Current Practices" in the journal *Issues in Education: Preschool through Graduate School* 1(1): 43–50; and coauthor of the chapter, "Information and Instruction Services" in *A Guide to the Management of Curriculum Materials Centers for the 21st Century: The Promise and the Challenge* (2001), edited by Jo Ann Carr and prepared by the Ad Hoc Management of Curriculum Materials Commit-

tee, Education and Behavioral Sciences Section, Association of College and Research Libraries.

**Carole J. McCollough** is a retired associate professor and dean of the Library and Information Science program at Wayne State University. She is currently an auxiliary faculty, trainer, and curriculum committee member for the Children's Defense Fund. In this capacity, Carole conducts workshops for college interns training to run summer literacy (Freedom School) programs. In addition to serving as chair of the CSK Book Award Committee, she served one term on the CSK Book Award jury and two terms as chair. She was a reviewer for the *Multicultural Literature Review Journal* and a contributing reviewer to *The Coretta Scott King Awards 1970–2009* first, second, third, and fourth editions, published by ALA. Her undergraduate degree and teaching certificate are from Eastern Michigan University. Her master's degree and PhD in library and information science are both from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. She currently serves on two library boards: Southfield Public Library, Southfield, Michigan, and the Langston Hughes Library, Clinton, Tennessee.

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