

## **Justice, Equality, Freedom: We Can't Wait**

Our theme this year, *Justice, Equality, Freedom: We Can't Wait*, is based on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1963 "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." In this open letter, King rebuked moderates and their embrace of gradual change by declaring that "we can't wait" and insisting that non-violent direct action would continue. King and many others had the courage to face jail time for their beliefs. The courage of conviction appeared in different ways, too. When Dave Brubeck gave up gigs so he could keep black players in his jazz band, he was showing the world he couldn't wait for them to accept blacks and whites performing together. Eventually, equal access to public accommodations, like libraries and bus depots, equal service at businesses, like clothing stores and amusement parks, and the freedom to register to vote were gained and enforced.

Yet today signs of racial oppression persist. When African Americans express pain, anger, or fear, we hear calls to keep calm and keep quiet, which are euphemisms for "hush!" We see evidence of a justice system skewed to punish people of color and to ignore or explain away crimes committed by whites. As a result, families of color are stressed by separations and by the difficulties convicted felons face in re-entering the work-force, even if they have turned their lives around. We see evidence of unequal opportunities as it becomes harder to work one's way out of poverty, to afford a college education, or to access support for starting up a business. More than fifty years later, the cry "We can't wait!" still resonates.

To honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we can't wait for justice, equality, and freedom. We must build a better world and a compassionate community now. Since education is a cornerstone of change and growth, the MLK Coalition supports the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County's purchase of books about the Civil Rights movement and Dr. King. Each year, we include in our program some of the books we recommend. Thanks to Martha Viehmann, Louise Lawarre, and two grade school readers Dior B. and Simeon B.

### **Books for Adults**

*Why We Can't Wait*, by Martin Luther King, Jr. Originally published in 1964; reissued in 2000 with an afterword by Jesse L. Jackson, Sr. In this book, King describes 1963 as the beginning of the "third revolution," specifically the revolt of African Americans that was rooted in the struggles in Birmingham, Alabama. He also explains the power of nonviolent resistance. An edited version of "Letter from Birmingham Jail" appears in this volume.

*The Radical King*. Over 20 selected essays and speeches of Dr. King with introductions by Cornel West. This collection includes "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and other works that make clear why King was viewed as one of the most dangerous men of his era.

*Across that Bridge: Life Lessons and a Vision for Change*, by John Lewis with Brenda Jones (2012). Congressman and activist John Lewis uses examples from the civil rights movement and from his life to illuminate the principles that guided him and others to stand up for the truth and change US history.

*The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander (2010). Michelle Alexander builds the case for recognizing in the War on Drugs the newest form of racialized social control. Alexander examines the legal process by which people of color are swept into the criminal justice system that, while appearing to focus on law and order, effectively recreates the old forms of discrimination in housing, employment, education, and voting for anyone labeled a felon. Coupled with the in-depth, thorough research and scholarship with which she details this new

caste system, Alexander offers a plea to end, not just mass incarceration, but the racial divisions that underlie it.

*Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015). In this letter addressed to his teenage son, correspondent Ta-Nehisi Coates explores a question that has haunted him since his boyhood, "How do I live free in this black body?" While politicians and the media like to call this a "post racial" era, Coates tells the story of his reality of fear and danger that he navigates on his way to school or through life. In heart-wrenching and often stark language, he unmaskes the racial divide that separates our nation, making a "dream" world for some and a deadly one for others. Coates does not offer solutions, but in giving voice to his reality, he bursts the silence that has allowed the racial divide to persist. The solutions are up to all of us.

*An Idea Whose Time Has Come: Two Presidents, Two Parties, and the Battle for the Civil Rights Act of 1964* by Todd S. Purdum (2014). Journalist Todd Purdum skillfully turns the passing of a bill into a gripping story. Anyone with an interest in the inner workings of Washington, the efforts of key figures including King, Sen. Dirksen, and Pres. Johnson, and the tumultuous period from JFK's assassination to the Johnson's signing of the Civil Rights Act will enjoy this book.

*Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and the Struggle that Changed a Nation* by Jonathan Rieder (2013). Prof. Rieder is a sociologist who has carefully studied Dr. King's use of language in an earlier book, *The Word of the Lord is Upon Me*. In this follow-up, Rieder outlines the context of "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and analyzes the text phrase by phrase. The letter is included in an appendix.

### **Books for Children**

*Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson (2014). Woodson writes a memoir in free verse to tell the story of how she became a writer and recount her family's life in Ohio, South Carolina, and New York. The poems create beautiful images of family love, loss, and faith that middle grade readers can easily grasp and older readers can enjoy, too. Woodson's story reveals the lingering effects of segregation in the south, the emergence of the black power movement, and the struggles of African Americans who migrated north throughout the 20th century. Mostly, though, this is a story of coming to understand that every person has a gift to share and the role that teachers, family, friends, and persistence play in bringing a dream to life.

*Side by Side: The Story of Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez/Lado a Lado: La Historia de Dolores Huerta y César Chávez* by Monica Brown, illus. by Joe Cepeda (2010). Award-winning author Monica Brown writes bi-lingual books that bring the lives of Hispanic historical figures to life. Here, aided by the colorful illustrations by Joe Cepeda, Brown recounts the protests for farmworkers rights that introduced the phrase "Sí, se puede!" (yes we can!). Like King, Chavez sought change through nonviolent action. Huerta continues her efforts to make the world a better place. Learn more about her at <doloreshuerta.org>. For families and teachers interested in other bilingual books, look for other titles by Ms. Brown, who has created a delightful biracial character whose infectious adventures celebrate difference: *Marisol McDonald Doesn't Match/Marisol McDonald No Combina* and *Marisol McDonald and the Clash Bash/Marisol McDonald y la Fiesta sin Igual*, both illustrated by Sara Palacios.

*Under the Same Sun* by Sharon Robinson, illus. by AG Ford (2014). Family love is at the center of this true story about traveling from the US to Tanzania to visit family. The story offers glimpses into the differences between the two countries by including a few Swahili words and featuring a

safari in the Serengeti. The lush illustrations show both similarities and differences: children in sneakers and T-shirts, women in vivid prints and head scarves, which underscore the message of global connection. A stop at the ruins of a slave-trading post adds a somber note, but the tragedy of the past is clearly just part of the story of this large and loving family. The promise of future reunions provides an uplifting conclusion.

*When Thunder Comes: Poems for Civil Rights Leaders* by J. Patrick Lewis, illus. by various artists (2012). In 15 poems, Lewis honors people from around the world who suffered and struggled for freedom. Most of the verses honor people who are less familiar, such as the first Asian American astronaut, one of the founders of the American Indian Movement, and the Muslim economist who used microcredit to support development in poor communities in Bangladesh. Biographies and resources are also included.

*My Name Is Jorge: On Both Sides of the River*, by Jane Medina, illus. by Fabricio Vanden Broeck (1999). Poems tell the story of a boy who has arrived in the US from Mexico and finds himself “dumb” when he once was the smartest boy in the class. In free verse, we learn the story of his growing confidence and friendships despite misunderstandings and slights. A wonderful presentation of an immigrant’s perspective.

*We Are America: A Tribute from the Heart*, by Walter Dean Myers, illus. by Christopher Myers (2011). Walter Dean Myers is one of the most celebrated children’s authors who wrote these poems to explore the meaning of America, especially from the point of view of people on the margins of the US history curriculum. Poems written from the perspectives of Indians, slaves, laborers, and all who struggled for freedom acknowledge both the best of our values and some dark aspects of our history. This collection of short, thought-provoking poems is punctuated with historical quotes and illustrated with lush paintings.