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Carter G. Woodson Book Awards Celebrate Diversity

Dee Storey

The Carter G. Woodson Book Awards celebrate diversity in the realm of specific multicultural literature written for children and young adults. Named in honor of the African-American social scientist, historian, and educator, the awards celebrate non-fiction trade books set in the United States centered on an ethnic group or ethnic groups and their particular issues, celebrations, or achievements. The National Council for the Social Studies sponsors the three awards—one for elementary, one for middle level, and one for secondary literature. Initially, the NCSS Committee for Racial and Social Justice, chaired by James Banks, only presented one award, in 1974, to honor, publicize, and promote literature written for youth that celebrated diversity. Because there was such a lack of specific multicultural literature in the 1970s available, and because very few organizations recognized or honored multicultural literature, it was hoped that the Carter G. Woodson Award would spur an interest in and a demand for such literature by readers, educators, writers, and publishers.

About Carter Woodson

In order to better understand the concepts behind this award program, information about Dr. Carter Godwin Woodson, “The Father of Black History,” would be beneficial to readers. Born the first of nine children to newly freed slaves in 1875, Woodson was raised in a world of poverty. Forced by the family’s economic situation, Woodson went to work at an early age and wasn’t able to attend

formalized school until his late teens when he enrolled in high school while working part-time. Although largely self taught and tutored by uncles, Woodson overcame seemingly impossible odds and graduated by the time he was twenty-two years old. His academic prowess was further enriched at Kentucky’s Berea College. After graduating from this institution in 1903, Woodson had, by 1908, received two degrees from the University of Chicago. In 1912, Woodson became the second black in the history of Harvard University to receive a Ph.D. from that school.

During his studies, Woodson became enthralled with the study of history, particularly African history and the history of blacks in America. He found that black history was seriously misrepresented, incorrectly reported, or purposefully omitted from American history textbooks and reference books. He also found that there was a lack of systematically collected materials that documented black history. As a result, Woodson set about to research and record the information that was so lacking.

Woodson’s premise that all races would benefit by understanding black history became the foundation for his life’s work. Knowing that the avenues for reporting black history, culture, and issues were severely limited, he set about to create several that would benefit such areas of study. In 1915 he founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life, an organization for scholars of black history and black issues. A year later, he began the *Journal of Negro History* specifically so that

researchers and scholars could disseminate their findings about black history and black issues. In 1920, Woodson organized the Associated Publishers in order to provide a source for authors who wrote about black culture and history. For the general audience, Woodson started the *Negro History Bulletin* in 1937 as the voice of the Associated Publishers geared for educators and high school students. Woodson was a prolific author whose works have stood the test of time. His books *The Education of the Negro Before 1861* and *The Mis-Education of the Negro* were and continue to be widely read by individuals of all races.

Throughout his life, Woodson challenged the notion that one race was superior to another. He worked to publicize the lives and achievements of blacks. In doing so, Woodson promoted pride in black individuals, black history, and black ancestry. Woodson's hard work also led to the popularization of black history when he initiated Negro History Week in 1926, which eventually became Black History Month in 1976.

The Award

In keeping with Woodson's philosophy that greater understanding comes through education and awareness, the National Council for the Social Studies Carter G. Woodson Book Awards honor nonfiction written for young people that records and chronicles issues, concerns, and achievements of ethnic groups in the United States. Readers of all ages will be introduced to authors and illustrators of many backgrounds and races who delve into a multitude of lives, cultures, issues, and places in the United States. In order to be considered for the awards, the nominees must, in part,

1. Show a respect for racial differences,
2. Provide insight into the experiences of racial and ethnic groups,
3. Show the interactions among ethnic and racial groups,
4. Avoid stereotypes, and
5. Promote pluralistic values.

Upon examination of the various winners and honor books, readers will come to appreciate how well

authors and illustrators have researched and presented the famous success stories, the not-so-famous achievers, and the basic, everyday people who celebrate their diversity. Readers will also come to learn that the winners and honor books have a number of commonalities.

Genres

Biographies are frequently the recipients of the award or honor distinction. The lives of politicians, artists, inventors, and others are explained. *Princess Ka'iulani: Hope of a Nation, Heart of a People* by Sharon Linnea (2000 Secondary Winner) and *The Last Princess: The Story of Princess Ka'iulani of Hawai'i* by Fay Stanley (1992 Elementary Winner) both chronicle the life of a young woman who was never slated by the United States government to become queen of this island nation. Other biographies include *Native American Doctor: The Story of Susan LaFlesche Picotte* by Jeri Ferris (1992 Secondary Winner), and *The Master of Mahogany: Tom Day, Free Black Cabinetmaker* by Mary E. Lyons (1995 Elementary Honor Book), and *Princess of the Press: The Story of Ida B. Wells-Burnett* by Angela Shelf (1998 Elementary Honor Book). Information about Dr. Woodson can be obtained by reading two biographies: *Carter G. Woodson: The Father of Black History* by Patricia and Frederick McKissack (1992 Elementary Honor Book) and *Carter G. Woodson: The Man Who Put "Black" in American History* by Jim Haskins and Kathleen Benson (2001 Middle Level Honor).

Autobiographies and biographies of everyday individuals are also represented in the CGW awards. In *Leon's Story*, Leon Tillage, a custodian at a middle school in Maryland when the book won the 1998 elementary award, recounts his experiences growing up as a black youth in North Carolina during the openly active days of the Ku Klux Klan. *The Riches of Oseola McCarty*, by Evelyn Coleman (1999 elementary honor book) is about an African-American woman who worked hard as a laundry woman living in poverty. She surprised everyone when, at age 87, she donated \$150,000 to Southern Mississippi University for student

scholarships. This sum represented her belief that if someone works hard and diligently saves, his or her endeavors will be of benefit.

Books detailing what it is like for a group to live in two worlds, within the realm of their cultural heritage and within the realm of white America, are readily available in the CGW awards. Titles illustrating the joys and frustrations of living such a dualistic life include *In Two Worlds: A Ypu'ik Eskimo Family* by Aylette Jenness and Alice Rivers (1990 elementary winner) and *Children of the Tlingit* by Frank Staub (2000 honor elementary honor book).

Other Considerations

Controversial issues specific to an ethnic or religious group are also highly represented in the awards. *Battlefields and Burial Grounds: The Indian Struggle to Protect Ancestral Graves in the United States* by Roger C. Echo-Hawk and Walter R. Echo-Hawk (1995 secondary honor book) is a sobering history of how the graves of Native American peoples have been desecrated, robbed, and destroyed at the hands of whites. *Till Victory is Won: Black Soldiers in the Civil War* by Zak Mettger (1995 secondary winner) outlines issues of discrimination during a particularly dark time of U.S. history.

Frequent Winners

Some authors have captured the awards and honors several times. Patricia and Frederick McKissack, authors of *Black Hands, White Sails: The Story of African-American Whalers* (2000 Secondary Honor Book); Jim Haskins, author of *Outward Dreams: Black Inventors and their Inventions* (1992 Secondary Honor Book); and Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith, author of *Celebrating Chinese New Year* (1999 Elementary Honor Book) have all received CGW kudos more than twice.

Some subjects have piqued the award committee's attention several times. For instance, *A Fence Away from Freedom: Japanese Americans and World War II* by Ellen Levine (1996 Secondary Winner), *Life in a Japanese American Internment*

Camp by Diane Yancey (1999 Secondary Honor Book), *The Children of Topaz: The Story of a Japanese-American Internment Camp* by Mike Tunnell and George Chilcoat (1997 Secondary Honor Book) all report perspectives about how people of Japanese ancestry were rounded up in the United States and forced into internment camps during World War II.

It is interesting to note that over the years, titles from the smaller publishing firms have been recognized in the Carter G. Woodson Book Awards, with Enslow Publishing Company leading the list. It can only be imagined that Dr. Woodson would be pleased to see that a small publishing house would have the opportunity to print and distribute an award-winning book that might not otherwise have the same chance with a larger company.

Conclusion

Woodson's dream of publicizing and popularizing the study of black history has been recognized and given enormous credence. Within the Carter G. Woodson Awards, his position has been expanded to popularizing and publicizing the study of a world of multicultural groups. His premise that everyone can benefit from the study of other cultures thrives within the Carter G. Woodson Awards. His position that the history of different cultural groups needs to be systematically collected and accurately reported flourishes within the Carter G. Woodson Awards. The Carter G. Woodson Book Awards celebrate diversity and the honor of Dr. Woodson.

Information about the Carter G. Woodson Book Awards can be found on the Internet at the site for the National Council for the Social Studies. Annual announcements of the award winners and honor books are made in the April/May edition of the NCSS journal, *Social Education*.

Timeline

- 1875 - Carter Godwin Woodson is born in Canton, Virginia
- 1896 - Woodson graduates from Douglass High School in Fayette, Virginia
- 1900- 1903 - Woodson teaches at and is principal of Douglass High School
- 1903-1906 - Woodson supervises schools in the Philippines and travels to Asia, North Africa, and Europe
- 1907 - Woodson receives bachelor's degree in history from University of Chicago (attended through courses by mail and attended summer courses)
- 1908 - Woodson received master's degree in romance languages from University of Chicago (attended through courses by mail and attended summer courses)
- 1909 - Woodson returns to the United States to live full time
- 1909-1918 - Woodson teaches at Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C. (French, Spanish, English, and history)
- 1912 - Woodson receives doctorate in history from Harvard University
- 1915 - *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861* by Woodson is published
- 1915 - Association for Study of History and Negro Life started by Woodson
- 1916 - *Journal of Negro History* started by Woodson
- 1919 - Woodson becomes head of the graduate faculty and dean of School of Liberal Arts at Howard University in Washington, D.C.
- 1922 - *The Negro in Our History* by Woodson is published
- 1926 - Negro History Week initiated by Woodson
- 1937 - *Negro History Bulletin* initiated by Woodson
- 1950 - Carter G. Woodson dies
- 1968 - Martin Luther King, Jr. assassinated
- 1973 - NCSS Committee for Racial and Social Justice creates Carter G. Woodson Award
- 1974 - NCSS awards first Carter G. Woodson Book Award
- 1976 - Negro History Week becomes Black History Month
- 1980 - First honor books in Carter G. Woodson Book Award noted
- 1990 - Carter G. Woodson Book Award has two divisions: elementary and secondary
- 1999- 25th anniversary of award - Carter G. Woodson Book Award book seals are unveiled
- 2001 - Carter G. Woodson Book Award has three divisions: elementary, middle level, secondary

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About the Author

Dee Storey, professor of Teacher Education at Saginaw Valley State University, teaches Children's and Young Adult Literature and storytelling.