

June 2023

STEAM Pride: Biographies & Autobiographies Written and/or Illustrated by Black Americans

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Recommended Citation

Mongo, Jonella Ph.D. (2023) "STEAM Pride: Biographies & Autobiographies Written and/or Illustrated by Black Americans," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 55: Iss. 3, Article 11.

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STEAM Pride: Biographies & Autobiographies Written and/or Illustrated by Black Americans

Cover Page Footnote

Gratitude to Dr. Rosalyn Shahid and Ateya Wilson for their timely feedback and keen attention to every word in this article.

S.T.E.A.M. Pride: Biographies & Autobiographies Written and/or Illustrated by Black Americans

by Jonella Mongo

As a young student, I was always encouraged to take pride in my elementary school, George Washington Carver, named for the prolific scientist known as the “peanut man.” Back then our school’s library shelves were filled with all kinds of books by many highly regarded authors. Yet, it was rare for the librarian to showcase many of the authors or illustrators from the collection. On occasion, she highlighted a few books or poems written by Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Phyllis Wheatley; however, I cannot recall any attention given to the illustrators.

During Black History week (now a full month) in February, these valued books along with a few others were used to help prepare students for the annual school program. As elementary students, we eagerly participated in learning activities so we could portray a myriad of famous Black people by dressing up like them to enthusiastically recite short paragraphs about their accomplishments. These early school experiences of reading, writing, and speaking about powerful and talented people from the Black community nurtured and supported my racial self-image and identity.

In addition, we had many opportunities to choose books and report on what we had learned. Of course, one of my first memories of doing a “book report” was on Dr. Carver, whom my teachers regularly talked about and inspired me to read and write about. At that time, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* was the main source of information along with the *Let’s Learn About...* books and occasionally the *Weekly Reader* news publication. Our resources were limited. Unlike my school experience, today there is a wide range of biographies that eloquently tell the life story of my school’s name-sake. A few of these include, *In the Garden with Dr. Carver* (2010) illustrated by *Nicole Tadgell, *George*



Jonella Mongo

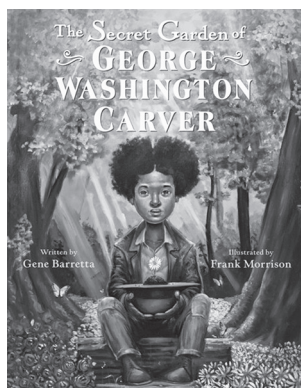
Washington Carver (2015) by *Tonya Bolden, and *The Secret Garden of George Washington Carver* (2020) illustrated by *Frank Morrison. All three of these books celebrate George Washington Carver, an accomplished botanist, scientist, and inventor.

If America is truly to become an inclusive and welcoming society for all, the contributions of all groups must be studied and celebrated. Real social justice and change will come when *all* American children consistently learn about and appreciate the contributions of Black Americans across all careers, and particularly in the areas of science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics. Encouraging each other to read and share children’s literature written and/or illustrated by Blacks can go a long way in changing how Americans view one another, with the goal of not only growing our knowledge but transforming the minds and hearts of people.

This article features biographies and autobiographies about Black Americans, written and/or illustrated by them (as indicated by the asterisks). These nonfiction books chronicle the lives of both several well-known and little-known individuals who have made impressive contributions to our nation and the world. The annotated list includes literature that showcases historical figures, as well as a few contemporary persons, across an

array of occupations, careers, and positions related to Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM). Their contributions are a definite source of pride for the African American community and this country, along with the cadre of Black writers and artists who ensured their stories were told. The following list of annotated book recommendations is arranged by STEAM topic.

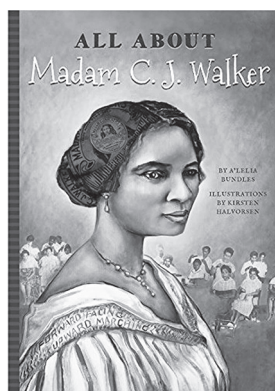
Science



Barretta, Gene, illustrator
*Frank Morrison, (2020),
The Secret Garden of George Washington Carver, Katherine Tegen Books.

(Ages 4-8)
This book tells the story of George Washington Carver, a man who overcame early adversities to

become a world-famous botanist, scientist, and inventor. His love of nature and desire for learning helped him discover more than 300 uses for the peanut.

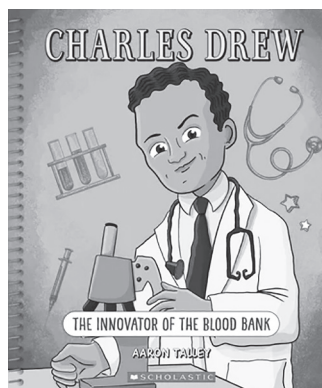


*Bundles, A'Lelia, illustrator
Kirsten Halvorsen, (2020),
All About Madam C. J. Walker, Blue River Press.

(Ages 8-11)
Written by Madam C. J. Walker's great-great granddaughter, this detailed biography highlights how

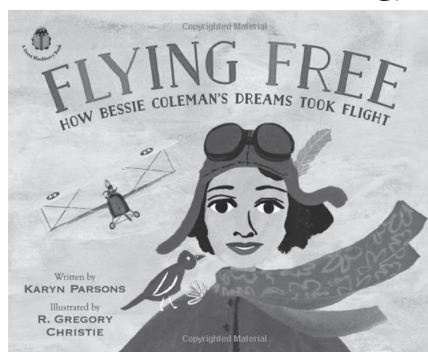
Walker went from doing laundry for other people to experimenting with hair products for scalp infections to owning a hair product manufacturing company. Walker would become the first female self-made millionaire in the country.

*Talley, Aaron, illustrator *Subi Bosa, (Spring 2023),
Charles Drew (Bright Minds): The Innovator of the Blood Bank, Scholastic.



(Ages 8-10)
Known as the father of the blood bank, Dr. Drew was a surgeon and medical researcher who discovered techniques for blood storage during World War II. This book describes his life and his accomplishments.

Technology

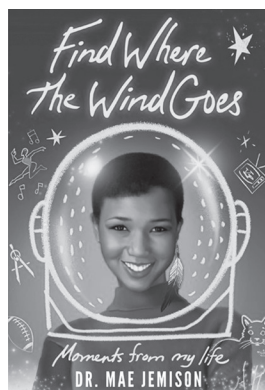


*Parsons, Karyn, illustrator
*R. Gregory Christie, (2020), *Flying Free: How Bessie Coleman's Dream Took Flight*, Little, Brown Books

for Young Readers.

(Ages 4-8)
Through engaging rhythmic text, Christie describes how Bessie Coleman knocked down barriers, fought racism and withstood difficult training to become the first Black female pilot in America.

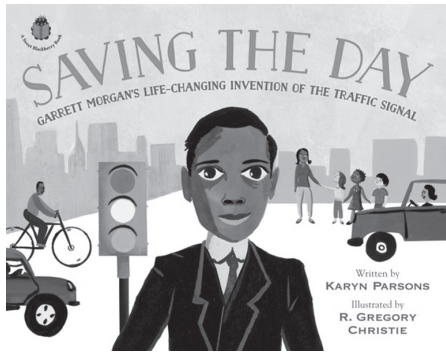
Engineering



*Jemison, Mae, (2021),
Find Where the Wind Goes, Moments from My Life, Signal Hill Road Publishing.

(Ages 13-17)
This book is an inspiring autobiography of the first African American woman to fly in space. Through the well-articulated story, Jemison shares her adventures as a scientist, doctor, and teacher.

Must Read Texts



*Parsons, Karyn, illustrator
*R. Gregory Christie, (2021), *Saving the Day: Garrett Morgan's Life Changing*

invention of the traffic signal, Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

(Ages 4-8)

As a little boy, Garrett was full of ideas on how to make life better for others. He would become a prominent businessman and inventor who produced the traffic light, gas mask, and other items still in use today. Young readers will enjoy this engaging text about Garrett Morgan's important invention.



*Tate, Don, illustrator
*Cherise Harris, (Fall 2023), *Jerry Changed the Game: How Jerry Lawson Revolutionized Video Games*

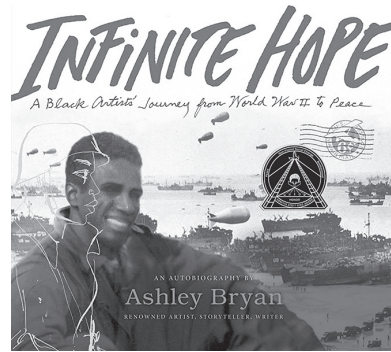
Forever, Simon & Schuster/Paula Wiseman Books.

(Ages 4-8)

Young children will enjoy learning about engineer Jerry Lawson who built a new kind of video game console with cartridges that players could switch out. He was the first African American to own a video game company in the United States.

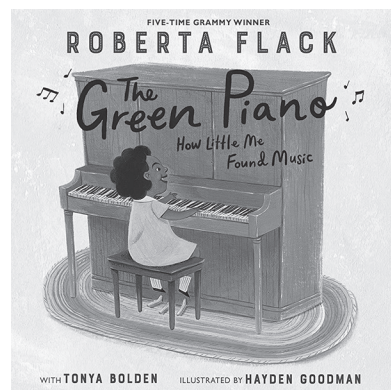
Arts

*Bryan, Ashley, (2019), *Infinite Hope: A Black Artists' Journey from World War II to Peace*, Caitlyn Dlouhy Books.



(Ages 8-up)
Many readers are familiar with Ashley Bryan as a renowned author and illustrator. However, through this autobiography, readers will explore another side of

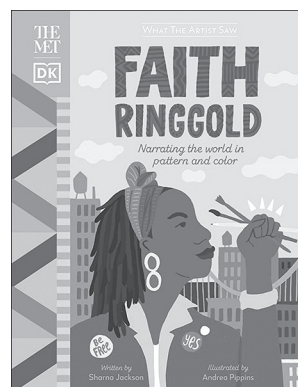
Ashley Bryan as they read his depictions of his life as a soldier on the front lines in Europe through his return home to America. His prolific artwork and numerous children's books, including this one, will be forever treasured around the world.



*Flack, Roberta &
*Bolden, Tonya, illustrator
*Hayden Goodman, (2023), *The Green Piano: How Little Me Found Music*, Ann Schwartz Books.

(Age 4-8)

This autobiographical picture book by Grammy Award-winning singer Roberta Flack provides a first-hand look at her family as well as her special relationship with music. Children will enjoy the story of how her father found an old, tattered piano in a junkyard that he fixed, and painted green for young Roberta to practice and hone her musical skills.

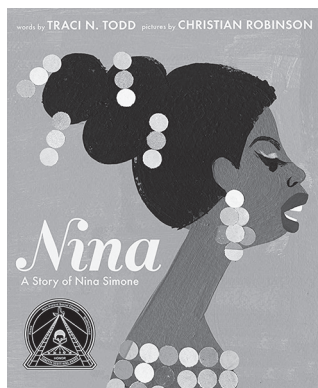


*Jackson, Sharna, illustrator
*Andrea Pippins, (2021), *Faith Ringgold: Narrating the World in Pattern and Color (What the Artist Saw)*, DK Children.

(Ages 7-9)

This is an inspiring story of

American activist and world-famous artist Faith Ringgold who uses mixed media to craft powerful stories into masterful quilts.



*Todd, Traci N., illustrator *Christian Robinson, (2021), *Nina: A Story of Nina Simone*, G. P. Putnam's Sons.

(Ages 4-8)
Nina Simone, born Eunice Kathleen Waymon in North Carolina, experienced the hurt and

anger of racism as she excelled musically, singing before talking and learning to play piano on the knees of her father. Throughout her career, Nina used her voice not only to sing and perform, but to champion the cause against racial inequality and discrimination.



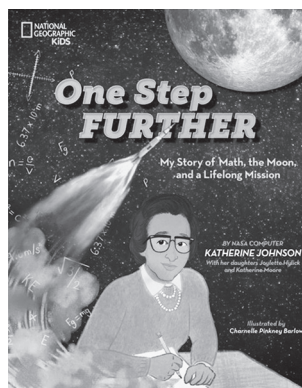
*Weatherford, Carole Boston, illustrator *Frank Morrison, (2020), *RESPECT: Aretha Franklin, The Queen of Soul*, Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

(Ages 4-8)

Fifteen moving words are used to help tell the story of the life of “the Queen of Soul” and Grammy Award winner Aretha Franklin who produced tons of hit recordings and became the first woman inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Aretha used her musical talents to support opposition to injustice and joined forces with others to fight for civil rights. This inspiring picture book biography was awarded the Coretta Scott King Illustration Award.

Mathematics

*Johnson, Katherine & *Joylette Hylick, *Katherine Moore, illustrator *Charnelle Barlow, (2021), *One Step Further: My story of Math, the Moon,*



and a lifelong Mission, National Geographic Kids.

(Ages 5-10)

Readers will appreciate the insights, personal stories, and family photos of Johnson and her daughters as they reflect on how they overcame the difficult times of the 1950s and

60s. Johnson's tenacity and strength not only helped her flourish but empowered her three daughters. This book eloquently tells their story; the book also includes extensive historical notes and a useful timeline.



*Thorpe, Andrea, (2021), *The Story of Katherine Johnson: A Biography Book for New Readers*, Rockridge Press.

(Ages 6-9)

In this text, Andrea Thorpe describes the important work of Katherine Johnson. As a young girl Katherine loved to explore, learn new things,

and solve problems. Her curiosity along with devotion to hard work and study lead her to become the first Black women hired by NASA. She would go from a young girl growing up in West Virginia to one of the best mathematicians in American history.

Author Biography

Dr. Jonella Mongo is a literacy consultant for nonprofits and community organizations that support children and families in southeastern Michigan. Her interests include African American children's literature, early writing development, and engaging families in literacy learning. She can be reached at <drjmongo@gmail.com>.