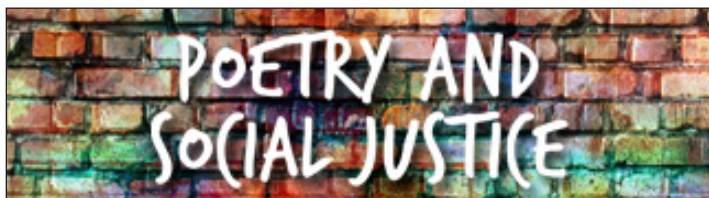


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It's been 50 years since the signing of the Civil Rights Act, in 1964, when discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin became against the law. It may be difficult for children today to imagine a world in which such discrimination was a common practice, but it is important that we recognize the ongoing effects of such prejudice and pause to celebrate the progress the U.S. has made as a nation. That's where literature can be especially powerful in capturing the pain of the past, the ongoing fight for justice, and our hopes for the future.

In my experiences working with children, I have found that they are usually very aware of issues of justice and fair play, albeit often in a narrow context. Ask students if they've ever stood at a store counter and watched all the grown-ups get attention while they wait, too shy or afraid to speak up. Or challenge them to think of a time at school or on the playground when they saw someone get picked on, and they stood by and said nothing. We've probably all had an experience in which we witnessed some level of injustice and were unsure what to do or hesitant to respond. This can be a beginning point for a discussion of how justice on a societal scale evolves—and how our individual actions can contribute to the problem or to the solution.

Literature can provide a helpful lens for framing discussion, offering a safe distance from which to consider painful topics and possible alternatives. Seeking out poetry, in particular, that captures a crystallized moment or a strong emotion can prompt a dialogue about both the issue described and the response to that issue. Many poets have focused on issues of justice, discrimination, and reconciliation in their work. In the books featured in this article, poets represent the struggle of enslaved peoples for freedom, the fight of citizens for equal rights, and the search for personal and political identity, all across the span of several generations, cultural groups, and geographic locales. In particular, works by poets such as Marilyn Nelson, Margarita Engle, J. Patrick Lewis, George Ella Lyon, Walter Dean Myers, and Carole Boston Weatherford help lay the groundwork for exploration of the social-justice issues that shaped U.S. history. We can link these works with picture books, novels, and nonfiction to make cross-genre connections, too.

## Looking at History

Several anthologies created by Lee Bennett Hopkins provide a panorama of U.S. history that offers a useful context for structuring conversations, and they can also serve as reference tools for understanding key events in America's history. Especially helpful are the following titles, all edited by Hopkins: *America at War*; *Hand in Hand: An American History through Poetry*; *Home to Me: Poems across America*; *Lives: Poems about Famous Americans*; and *My America: A Poetry Atlas of the United States*.

In addition, other comprehensive collections use the span of U.S. history to shape the selection and arrangement of poetry, including *Celebrating America: A Collection of Poems and Images of the American Spirit*, edited by Laura Whipple; *Hour of Freedom: American History in Poetry*, edited by Milton Meltzer; *Music and Drum: Voices of War and Peace, Hope and Dreams*, edited by Laura Robb; *Rutherford B., Who Was He? Poems about Our Presidents*, by Marilyn Singer; and *Tour America: A Journey through Poems and Art*, by Diane Siebert. Invite students to work together to locate poems from any of these collections that address justice issues. They can read their selected poem aloud to the group and identify a human-rights issue as they perceive it, citing language from the poem to support their case. As a class, make a chart of these various issues (racial discrimination, gender discrimination, poverty, etc.), and note where each poem fits. Talk together about how the poet approaches the topic using literary elements such as point of view, time period, and physical setting, and encourage students to refer back to the texts in their examples.

Older students may be able to dig deeper into poetry that addresses conflicts of the past. Collaborate with history or social-studies teachers to link poems to the curriculum and place them in context on a historical time line. Encourage discussion about how people of various backgrounds were treated, what role gender played in their struggles, and how they were able to prevail and be heard.

Books that would be useful prompts for these conversations include titles by Margarita Engle, such as, *The Firefly Letters: A Suffragette's Journey to Cuba*; *The Lightning Dreamer: Cuba's Greatest Abolitionist*; *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano*; and *Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal*. Also excellent for supporting discussions about U.S. history and civil rights: *Miss Crandall's School for Young Ladies and Little Misses of Color*, by Elizabeth Alexander and Marilyn Nelson; *Never Forgotten*, written by Patricia McKissack and illustrated by Leo Dillon and Diane Dillon; *Poetry for Young People: African American Poetry*, edited by Arnold Rampersad and Marcellus Blount; *Remember the Bridge: Poems of a People*, by Carole Boston Weatherford; *Sweethearts of Rhythm: The Story of the Greatest All-Girl Swing Band in the World*, by Marilyn Nelson; and *This Land Is My Land*, by George Littlechild.

## Connecting Past and Present

It is also important to point out that justice issues from the past remain with us even now. Explore how people today experience injustice or empowerment in these poetry selections: *Declaration of Interdependence: Poems for an Election Year*, by Janet Wong; *We Are America: A Tribute from the Heart*, written by Walter Dean Myers and illustrated by Christopher Myers; *We the People*, by Bobbi Katz; and *Yes! We Are Latinos!*, written by Alma Flor Ada and F. Isabel Campoy and illustrated by David Diaz. Invite students to find news articles that address a social-justice issue, and encourage them to create “black-out” poems by blotting out all unwanted words in their news articles with a thick, black marker. The words that are left behind can be rearranged into a poem of their own making that reflects ideas of justice.

## One Book: One Study

It can also be meaningful to dig collectively into one book that addresses a historic event. One powerful example worthy of group study is *Voices from the March on Washington*, by J. Patrick Lewis and George Ella Lyon. This poetry collection focuses specifically on the march on Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his “I Have a Dream” speech. Six fictional characters tell their tales on this historic day in cycles of linked poems alongside the perspectives of historic figures and other march participants for a rich tapestry of multiple points of view. See the sidebar interview, “Focus on *Voices from the March on Washington*,” for more insight into the creation of this book and into the events that shaped the authors’ perspectives.

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**César:** Sí, se puede! Yes, We Can! By Carmen T. Bernier-Grand. Illus. by David Diaz. 2004. 48p. Amazon/Two Lions, paper, \$7.99 (9780761458333). 811. Gr. 3–6.

**Declaration of Interdependence:** Poems for an Election Year. By Janet Wong. 2012. 64p. CreateSpace, paper, \$7.99 (9781468191912). 811.54. Gr. 5–12.

**The Firefly Letters:** A Suffragette’s Journey to Cuba. By Margarita Engle. 2010. 160p. Holt, \$17.99 (9780805090826); e-book, \$9.99 (9781429959452). 813. Gr. 6–12.

**Freedom like Sunlight:** Praisesongs for Black Americans. By J. Patrick Lewis. Illus. by John Thompson. 2000. 40p. Creative, paper, \$9.99 (9780898129731). 811. Gr. 5–12.

**Hand in Hand:** An American History through Poetry. Ed. by Lee Bennett Hopkins. Illus. by Peter M. Fiore. 1994. 144p. Simon & Schuster, \$26.99 (9780671733155). 811. Gr. 4–8.

**Heroes and She-roes:** Poems of Amazing and Everyday Heroes. By J. Patrick Lewis. Illus. by Jim Cooke. 2005. 40p. Dial, \$16.99 (9780803729254). 811. Gr. 4–7.

**Home to Me:** Poems across America. Ed. by Lee Bennett Hopkins. Illus. by Stephen Alcorn. 2002. 48p. Orchard, o.p. 811.008. Gr. 2–5.

**Hour of Freedom:** American History in Poetry. Ed. by Milton Meltzer. Illus. by Marc Nadel. 2003. 96p. Wordsong, o.p. 811.54. Gr. 6–12.

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**The Lightning Dreamer:** Cuba’s Greatest Abolitionist. By Margarita Engle. Illus. by Edel Rodriguez. 2013. 192p. Harcourt, \$16.99 (9780547807430); e-book, \$16.99 (9780547807478). Gr. 7–12.

**Lives:** Poems about Famous Americans. Ed. by Lee Bennett Hopkins. Illus. by Leslie Staub. 1999. 40p. HarperCollins, \$17.99 (9780060277673). 811.008. Gr. 3–6.

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**My America:** A Poetry Atlas of the United States. Ed. by Lee Bennett Hopkins. Illus. by Stephen Alcorn. 2000. 96p. Simon & Schuster, \$24.99 (9780689812477). 811.008. Gr. 4–6.

**Never Forgotten.** By Patricia C. McKissack. Illus. by Leo Dillon and Diane Dillon. 2011. 48p. Random/Schwartz & Wade, \$18.99 (9780375843846); lib. ed., \$21.99 (9780375944536). Gr. 4–8.

**The Poet Slave of Cuba:** A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano. By Margarita Engle. Illus. by Sean Qualls. 2006. 192p. Holt, \$16.95 (9780805077063); Square Fish, paper, \$9.99 (9780312659288). 811. Gr. 7–10.

**Poetry for Young People:** African American Poetry. Ed. by Arnold Rampersad and Marcellus Blount. Illus. by Karen Barbour. 2013. 48p. Sterling, \$14.95 (9781402716898). 811.008. Gr. 3–8.

**Remember the Bridge:** Poems of a People. By Carole Boston Weatherford. 2002. 56p. illus. Philomel, \$19.99 (9780399237263). 811. Gr. 7–12.

**Rutherford B., Who Was He?** Poems about Our Presidents. By Marilyn Singer. Illus. by John Hendrix. 2013. 56p. Disney/Hyperion, \$17.99 (9781423171003). 811. Gr. 5–8.

**Silver People:** Voices from the Panama Canal. By Margarita Engle. 2014. 272p. Houghton, \$17.99 (9780544109414); e-book, \$17.99 (9780544109223). Gr. 7–12.

**Sweethearts of Rhythm:** The Story of the Greatest All-Girl Swing Band in the World. By Marilyn Nelson. Illus. by Jerry Pinkney. 2009. 80p. Dial, \$21.99 (9780803731875). 811. Gr. 5–8.

**This Land Is My Land.** By George Littlechild. Illus. by the author. 1993. 32p. Children's Book Press, paper, \$10.95 (9780892391844). 971. Gr. 6–9.

**Tour America:** A Journey through Poems and Art. By Diane Siebert. Illus. by Stephen T. Johnson. 2006. 64p. Chronicle, o.p. 811. Gr. 4–7.

**Vhorses:** A Celebration of Outstanding Women. By J. Patrick Lewis. Illus. by Mark Summers. 2005. 32p. Creative, o.p. 811. Gr. 4–7.

**Voices from the March on Washington.** By J. Patrick Lewis and George Ella Lyon. 2014. 128p. Wordsong, \$15.95 (9781620917855). 323. Gr. 5–12.

**We Are America:** A Tribute from the Heart. By Walter Dean Myers. Illus. by Christopher Myers. 2011. 40p. HarperCollins, \$16.99 (9780060523084). 811. Gr. 4–8.

**We the People.** By Bobbi Katz. Illus. by Nina Crews. 2000. 112p. Greenwillow, o.p. 811.54. Gr. 5–8.

**When Thunder Comes:** Poems for Civil Rights Leaders. By J. Patrick Lewis. Illus. by Jim Burke and others. 2013. 44p. Chronicle, \$16.99 (9781452101194). 811. Gr. 4–7.

**Yes! We Are Latinos!** By Alma Flor Ada and F. Isabel Campoy. Illus. by David Diaz. 2013. 96p. Charlesbridge, \$18.95 (9781580893831). Gr. 3–6.

**Sylvia M. Vardell** is a professor of children's and young adult literature at Texas Woman's University, the coeditor of the Poetry Friday anthology series, and the author of the *Poetry for Children* blog.

## Web Connections

For additional Internet resources to link with books about poetry and social justice, visit [booklistonline.com](http://booklistonline.com), and select "Web Connections" under *Book Links* on the left-hand navigation bar.

## Focus on *Voices from the March on Washington*

In the following conversation, authors J. Patrick Lewis (JPL) and George Ella Lyon (GEL) and editor Rebecca Davis (RD) discuss the connections between social justice and poetry and how they created the poetry collection *Voices from the March on Washington*.

### **BKL: Where did the idea for this book come from?**

**GEL:** First, I wanted to write a book about Mary Travers, activist and singer of the folk group Peter, Paul and Mary. For many reasons, that impulse morphed into writing about Mary, Odetta, and Joan Baez singing at the march on Washington. My idea was that I could explore how they became powerful young women whose lives and voices intersected that day. That project didn't take hold, but through my research, I became fascinated with the march itself. Because I'm first of all a poet, and because the intensity of poetry fits the intensity of the day, I began writing poems.

Then I flew to California to speak at the Charlotte S. Huck Literature Festival at the University of Redlands. Pat Lewis, whom I'd met briefly before, was also on the program, and he asked if I wanted to collaborate on a collection of poems, perhaps focusing on famous women. I was thrilled with this possibility and suggested the march as our subject. Typical of Pat, he took off with this idea and drafted five poems in a week. (Having already written several books connected with the civil rights movement, Pat had done much of the research that I was just beginning.)

### **BKL: Rebecca, what was your role as editor in facilitating this project?**

**RD:** I fell in love with this manuscript the first time I read it. It contained so many powerful poems. I suggested to Pat and George Ella that they take some of the characters and develop their personal stories a bit further in the course of the manuscript, so that readers would see the impact that the experience of being part of the march had on these characters. I thought this might make what was already a personal and powerful manuscript even more personal and immediate.

In the final book, six of the characters have cycles of poems (ranging from four to eight poems each) that are braided among the chorus of voices in the manuscript. I edited individual poems and also looked for balance in the collection as a whole. Part of the magic in this collection is the many voices and points of view that it captures. The six characters—we've been referring to them as soloists in the chorus—couldn't take over the book; their individual melodies needed to blend in and harmonize with the whole.

It seemed to me, too, that an introduction was needed to help put the poems into historical perspective for young readers, and that it would be good to have back matter that would help readers sort the fact from the fiction in the story. We organized the back matter as a "Guide to the Voices," providing information about the historical figures who appear and/or are mentioned in the poems (under the heading "Historical Voices") and also listing the fictional characters (under the heading "Imagined Voices").

### **BKL: Since race is an essential component of this book, were you concerned about being white writers representing African American voices?**

**GEL:** I was. My journal is full of questions: Who am I to do this? How can I presume? How could I ever know enough? And what about things I can never know because I am white? I struggled with these up and down the block, and what I came to was that this is a work of imagination, and imagination is not the same as appropriation. I haven't been poor, like some characters I've created. I haven't been a boy, or lost part of my leg to diabetes, or had

a vision of God as a woman and gotten thrown out of church for saying so. I haven't traveled through time to deliver medicine to a Civil War nurse. I imagined these experiences, and I did everything I could to prepare myself for these imaginings.

I believe that the more we can imagine one another's experience, the more we can empathize and understand that what connects us is greater than what separates us. That is the direction of hope.

**JPL:** Irrespective of one's race or gender, one should be able to write about any human being. That is the true meaning of multiculturalism—at least it is to me.

### **BKL: You employ a variety of poem forms and structures throughout the book. How did you decide on those?**

**GEL:** How a poem comes to its form is an intricate and not altogether conscious process for me. "Reflection," the opening poem, is the exception. I had a vision of a poem that would look like the iconic photo of the march, with the crowd stretching from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial and framing the reflecting pool. I had no words to begin with, just the image, and I tried to talk myself out of it, but the vision wouldn't go away. I could think of so many reasons it was a bad idea, some of which were covering up my reluctance to dive into the work it was going to require. But once I surrendered, I was obsessed, and it has gone through more revision than any of my other poems in the collection.

Other poems, such as "Mr. Ravizee," revealed their form in the process of revision. Seeing that some lines were repeating, and how their recurrence fit the speaker's meditation on "nobody is nobody," I thought, "There may be a villanelle in there!" This is the value of practicing different forms: when the right material arrives, you have that form in your toolbox.

**JPL:** There are no writers in this world, only rewriters. Which is to say that revision rules the day—or it should—and revision means experimentation. So the poems you read in the book are the product of hours, days of rewriting. If the writer is very lucky, the eventual form will be the correct one for the subject.

### **BKL: What is the connection between poetry and social justice?**

**GEL:** Poetry is spirit expressed in body: rhythm, sensation, thought, song. So although a lyric poem may be intimate, a heart-cry, it can also be addressed to the community. This happens especially in times of collective tragedy. I think of the poems posted near ground zero after 9/11. They were deeply personal, but they called out to be shared, to express trauma and grief and assure poets and readers that we are not alone. To claim a voice is in itself a form of activism.

**JPL:** I like to think that we are bearing witness, albeit in absentia, to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Dream" speech and all that it entails.

## Common Core Connections

The following are suggestions for incorporating social-justice-themed poetry into the curriculum while implementing the Common Core State Standards. Pair these ideas with other classroom strategies included in the accompanying feature. You can find more information about the standards at [corestandards.org](http://corestandards.org).

**In the Classroom:** Because *Voices from the March on Washington*, by J. Patrick Lewis and George Ella Lyon, is rich with the perspectives of multiple characters, it begs to be performed as readers' theater, with individual students taking on a persona and reading poems aloud as that character. Wearing a simple sign with each character's name can be helpful, and if simple props are available (hats, necklace, neckties, etc.), those can be fun visual aids, too. For an even more ambitious presentation, display a slideshow of images as a backdrop for the reading, and student volunteers can research images from that time period or that suit their characters (e.g., photos of march attendees Lena Horne, Joan Baez, Coretta Scott King, Rosa Parks, Marian Anderson, Charlton Heston, and Malcolm X). Record students' readings using VoiceThread, or look for audio and/or video recordings of performances and speeches from the march. For example, you can listen to (and watch) Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech at multiple locations, including YouTube.

Hearing actual voices reading can assist in discussing *Voices from the March on Washington* and the concept of "voice" in poetry. Who is speaking? Whose point of view is represented? Why is it so important to be heard? How are the concepts of justice and voice linked? Connect *Voices* with other works of poetry told from multiple perspectives, such as Karen Hesse's *Witness* or Walter Dean Myers' *Here in Harlem*. How would these works be different if told from a single point of view?

### Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.7.** Compare and contrast the experience of reading a story, drama, or poem to listening to or viewing an audio, video, or live version of the text, including contrasting what they "see" and "hear" when reading the text to what they perceive when they listen or watch.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.5.** Analyze how a drama's or poem's form or structure (e.g., soliloquy, sonnet) contributes to its meaning
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.6.** Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text.

**In the Classroom:** Like poetry, music can play a pivotal role in expressing people's dreams and hopes. Many musicians and performers were present at the march, and several specific songs are referenced in *Voices from the March on Washington*, including "Creed," "Pigs Are Flyin'," "Anthem for Rosa Parks," and "Ballad for Martin Luther King, Jr." After playing a selection of the songs featured in *Voices*, discuss as a class how music influences movements, unites people, rallies enthusiasm, and creates a space to share disappointments. Talk about what kinds of songs today capture students' current concerns and their hopes for the future. Next, have students consult the following resources to study the role of music in the civil rights movement: *From Sea to Shining Sea: A Treasury of American*

*Folklore and Folk Songs*, edited by Amy L. Cohn; *Nobody Gonna Turn Me 'Round: Stories and Songs of the Civil Rights Movement*, by Doreen Rappaport; *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through Its Songs*, by Candie Carawan and Guy Carawan; and *We Shall Overcome: A Song That Changed the World*, written by Stuart Stotts and illustrated by Terrance Cummings. In addition, National Public Radio has created the online resource "Songs of the Civil Rights Movement," with audio files and background information (<http://n.pr/1hc17s4>). Follow this research by discussing self-expression and form. Why does one person write a poem and another person write a song and yet another person write a news article or speech? Finally, return to *Voices from the March on Washington*, and use the poems to explore poetic forms. Ask students to identify which selections represent which forms (e.g., free verse, anthems, ballads, shape poems, protest poetry, etc.) and which "speak" to students most deeply.

### Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.4.** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.5.** Analyze how a drama's or poem's form or structure (e.g., soliloquy, sonnet) contributes to its meaning.

**In the Classroom:** *Voices from the March on Washington* provides students with an opportunity to follow up references to poetic works with other poems that also address justice issues. In *Voices*, authors J. Patrick Lewis and George Ella Lyon mention the poetry of Langston Hughes, for example. Encourage students to seek out examples of Hughes' work, such as his anthology *The Dream Keeper* or picture-book versions of single poems, such as *I, Too, Am America*, illustrated by Bryan Collier. Next, in a class discussion or as a written or oral assignment, have students connect themes in Hughes' poems with selections from additional anthologies that explore civil rights and social justice. Point them to the compelling poetry gathered by Gail Bush and Randy Meyer in *Indivisible: Poems for Social Justice* or to additional, related titles by J. Patrick Lewis, including *Freedom like Sunlight: Praisesongs for Black Americans*; *Heroes and She-roses: Poems of Amazing and Everyday Heroes*; *Vherses: A Celebration of Outstanding Women*; and *When Thunder Comes: Poems for Civil Rights Leaders*.

### Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.2.** Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.1.** Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.1.** Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

## Common Core Connections

**In the Classroom:** For a cross-genre approach, dig deeply into the historic civil rights victories of 1963 and 1964 by linking *Voices from the March on Washington* with other titles that focus on this pivotal time period. The free-verse title *Birmingham, 1963*, by Carole Boston Weatherford, and the novel *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, by Christopher Paul Curtis, are excellent options for creating book pairs with *Voices*. For picture books to link with *Voices* and share with upper-elementary students, try *Freedom Summer*, by Deborah Wiles, and *We March*, by Shane Evans. And, finally, the following informational titles also make excellent book-pair options with *Voices*: *Freedom Summer: The 1964 Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*, by Susan Goldman Rubin, and *We've Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children's March*, by Cynthia Levinson. Depending on which book-pair suggestion you're focusing on, discuss with students the differences in what they glean from the text and art of a picture book, from the characters and narrative of a novel, from the facts and details in an informational work, and, of course, from the language and emotional impact of poetry.

### Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.2.** Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.7.** Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text (e.g., graphic novel, multimedia presentation of fiction, folktale, myth, poem).
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.9.** Compare and contrast one author's presentation of events with that of another (e.g., a memoir written by and a biography on the same person).