

Walter Dean Myers, Coretta Scott King Award winner & Newberry Honor winner

Becoming Billie Holiday is a fine piece of work. I love Carole Boston Weatherford's work generally and this is among her finest. She definitely brings the jazz legend to life with a rarely found sympathy and understanding. Her poetic forms blend beautifully with Floyd Cooper's art to make the book a must read.

Wowie, wow, wow. This little beauty just leapt to the top of my wish list. I've had my eye on Carole Boston Weatherford ever since she wrote *Moses*, but . . . she's topped it with *Becoming Billie Holiday*.

The writing is killer and the format unique: an illustrated fictional verse memoir. And get this -- the title of each poem is a Billie Holiday song. I know next to nothing about Billie Holiday's life, but fictional or not, I'm perfectly content getting all my information here. My sense is that Weatherford was true to her subject; regardless, I don't care to break this book's spell with plain old facts. Straight non-fiction would be hard pressed to duplicate the imagery and sense of character Weatherford's poems convey.

To crown it all, I don't think you even have to be a Holiday fan to dig this book. Lady Day had it rough, and her childhood makes for compelling reading. Among other things there's prostitution, rape, racism, and reefer in here -- none of it tawdry, but gritty enough to rule out the elementary school crowd. Would somebody please put a shiny sticker on this beauty?

From Noted Authors

Nikki Grimes, Coretta Scott King Award winner

Weatherford brings Billie to life for a new generation. Her poems help readers understand the source of Billie's songs, the pulse of her life. The poetry is plain-spoken, like Billie. Weatherford has wisely written with poetic restraint, allowing the voice of Billie to come through.

Is it my imagination? The poetry seems to modulate, building as Billie's story builds, picking up pace as her career explodes, slowing whenever the story stumbles on a sour note, swinging whenever the story hits the stage.

Blithe and edgy, just like Billie's life.

Arnold Adoff

for me this book is more than fifty years overdue....as a young boy i devoured billie's music on the radio....

this book is a complete joy: a superb poet's master work synthesized seamlessly with a black and brown symphony of finely-crafted illustrations....

and the poetry: biography and insight and incident and the 4/4 movement from then to now to the next times of the music...for us all....

i snap my fingers...i pat my foot...i read and reread and rise with a silly grin of satisfactions...and the voice of singer and the voice of poet: still strong and clear and true....

Advance Praise for *Becoming Billie Holiday*
by Carole Boston Weatherford; illustrated by Floyd Cooper
(Boyd's Mills Press/Wordsong, October 2008)

Kirkus Reviews, starred review, Sept. 1, 2008

A ★star is given to books of unusual merit.

"I toted my songs / like a satchel and felt most / at home when I sang," says Billie Holiday in this gorgeously produced fictional "life in poems" of the great jazz singer. Weatherford's poetry sings Lady Day's blues, from a troubled childhood in Baltimore to success in Harlem and on the road, though a tough road it was. Holiday never knew her father's love and experienced rape, reform school, jail and vicious racism in a land where "the color line / was as plain as the stripe down a highway." The first-person poems, titled after actual songs, conclude with Holiday at her peak at age 25, singing her signature "Strange Fruit."

The poetry is rich and evocative, fully up to celebrating a singer who could "breathe a universe in a single note." Cooper uses his trademark subtractive technique to great effect, providing a beautiful visual complement to the poetry. A remarkable tribute well worthy of its subject.

teensreadtoo.com, 5 stars, Gold Award

A biography written in verse seems only appropriate for a woman who lived her life in song -- whose only reliable escape was via music. Weatherford uses Holiday songs as poem titles throughout the book, which, in addition to the first person perspective, serves to bring the reader close to the narrative. While the story of Holiday's life is disturbing, Weatherford does a fantastic job of pulling readers in for an occasional close-up, and in giving them much-needed distance -- room to breathe. Subtlety is key, and both author and artist seem to realize the delicate balance. Floyd Cooper used a subtractive technique for the gorgeous illustrations. . . . The heavily textured, sepia tones flow seamlessly into the verse. Then we have the book itself, smooth to the touch, but grainy and old school. Billie Holiday all over. This publisher, Wordsong, created a perfect marriage of author & artist, then packaged the work brilliantly in a book for the ages.

www.brownbookshelf.com

Becoming Billie Holiday is a coming of age, fictionalized memoir told in verse. . . . Combining oral histories from the singer's contemporaries with Holiday's sensationalized autobiography, Weatherford imagines Holiday's legendary life from birth to young adulthood. This story is real. Holiday's life was rough around the edges, and the story doesn't dance around those issues. . . . Words and art expertly combine to tell a compelling story of triumph (sink or swim, maybe) in the face of adversity.

From the Blogosphere

sarahmillerbooks/blogspot.com

WEB SITES

www.becomingbillieholiday.com

Official author site: www.caroleweatherford.com

Official illustrator site: www.floydcooper.com

Book trailer on youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBy3CWHVzH0>

Myspace page: www.myspace.com/becomingbillieholiday

Billie Holiday: The Official Site of Lady Day www.cmgww.com/music/holiday

MY 10 FAVORITE BILLIE HOLIDAY SONGS: A LIST

by Carole Boston Weatherford
Author, *Becoming Billie Holiday*

Getting Some Fun Out of Life

Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man of Mine

Summertime

Love Me or Leave Me

God Bless the Child

Autumn in New York

Moonlight in Vermont

Ain't Nobody's Business

I Gotta Right to Sing the Blues

Strange Fruit

10 THINGS I LEARNED ABOUT LADY DAY: A LIST

by Carole Boston Weatherford
Author, *Becoming Billie Holiday*

1. She loved dogs. She owned boxers and chihuahuas and crocheted a sweater for one pooch. She took her dog with her to clubs, restaurants and church.
2. She read pulp fiction magazines and love comics.
3. She competed in the amateur contest at Baltimore's Harlem Theatre.
4. She helped her mother in soul-food restaurants that she ran out of their homes.
5. She shoplifted as a girl.
6. She was a tomboy and fought boys who teased her.
7. She was afraid of bugs and dead people.
8. She was baptized in the first African-American Catholic church in the United States (St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Baltimore).
9. She dropped out of school in fifth grade.
10. She was the first African-American vocalist to tour with an all-white big band.

BACKGROUNDER

New York Times best-selling author Carole Boston Weatherford may have been destined to write *Becoming Billie Holiday*. Baltimore-born Weatherford cut her teeth on Holiday's last major recording, *Lady in Satin*. But it was the 1972 film *Lady Sings the Blues* that made Weatherford a Billie devotee. Holiday's haunting voice and heartrending life story resonated with the teenage Weatherford.

The singer became Weatherford's muse. Then, Holiday prodded the poet to pen her memoir. Weatherford reluctantly agreed, but almost abandoned the notion for fear that teens might not relate to a long-gone jazz legend. Then, an eighth grader admiring the singer's likeness at Baltimore's Great Blacks in Wax Museum convinced Weatherford of Holiday's enduring appeal.

The poet dove into the project, listening to early recordings, reading biographies and perusing oral histories. As Weatherford researched, Holiday seemed to whisper in her ear, and as she wrote, the singer seemed to hum in the background.

The resulting fictional verse memoir, a sequence of ninety-seven, first-person poems titled after her songs, depicts Holiday with rare empathy. *Becoming Billie Holiday* chronicles the singer's life from birth to "Strange Fruit." "The poems spotlight a youthful and exuberant Holiday before heroin and hard living took their toll," says Weatherford. "I believe that's how Billie would want to be remembered."

Like Weatherford, illustrator Floyd Cooper is also a fan. "I love Billie Holliday and I can't help it," he confesses. "The wistful strains of her soulful sound have a way of tugging insistently at my own past, calling me home. The surprising thing is, just like her music, working on this book took me back home in that same figurative way."

He created the art with a subtractive technique, using erasers to make shapes from a ground of paint. He then enhanced the shapes with mixed media, mostly oil-based, layered in a dry brush fashion. The result are a series of paintings that unfold cinematically, like a 1930s movie.

BIOGRAPHIES

AUTHOR BIO

New York Times best-selling author Carole Boston Weatherford has 32 books, including *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom*, winner of an NAACP Image Award, Caldecott Honor Medal and Coretta Scott King Award for Illustration. *Birmingham, 1963* won the Jefferson Cup, Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award, and a Jane Addams Children's Literature Honor. Winner of the Carter G. Woodson Award from National Council for the Social Studies and the Ragan-Rubin Award from the North Carolina English Teachers Association, Weatherford teaches at Fayetteville State University. A Baltimore native, she earned advanced degrees from the University of Baltimore and the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. She lives in High Point, North Carolina.

ILLUSTRATOR BIO

Floyd Cooper has illustrated more than sixty books for children, including *Grandpa's Face* by Eloise Greenfield, *Meet Danitra Brown* by Nikki Grimes, *I Have Heard of a Land* by Joyce Carol Thomas, *Tough Boy Sonatas* by Curtis L. Crisler, *Miss Crandall's School for Young Ladies & Little Misses of Color* by Elizabeth Alexander and Marilyn Nelson, and *Coming Home: From the Life of Langston Hughes*, which he wrote. He is the recipient of three Coretta Scott King Honors, ten American Library Association Notables, and an NAACP Image Award. A native of Tulsa, Oklahoma, Cooper lives in Easton, Pennsylvania.

For Immediate Release

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IMAGINE A JAZZ LEGEND SINGING HER STORY IN YOUR EAR

Becoming Billie Holiday

By Carole Boston Weatherford

Art by Floyd Cooper

★ *A remarkable tribute well worthy of its subject . . .*—**Kirkus Reviews**, starred review

New York Times best-selling author Carole Boston Weatherford and award-winning illustrator Floyd Cooper paint a sensitive portrait of vocalist the young Billie Holiday. Before there was the legendary Lady Day, there was Eleanora Fagan, enduring pain, poverty and run-ins with the law. Eleanora came of age just as the Harlem Renaissance faded into the Great Depression. Luckily she had a voice. She began her singing career as a teen. By age 25, she had fronted the era's hottest bands and recorded her signature song "Strange Fruit." Poems by Weatherford trace Eleanora's metamorphosis into Billie Holiday, from her Baltimore beginnings to her Harlem heyday. Stunning sepia-toned art by Cooper completes this fictional verse memoir.

Baltimore-born Weatherford, who calls Holiday her muse, felt as if the singer whispered and hummed in her ear as she wrote the book. The collection's 97 poems are titled after Holiday's songs and narrated by the singer herself.

Cooper says Holiday's music always takes him back. He poured that nostalgia into the book's art, which he created with a subtractive technique, using erasers to make shapes from a ground of paint. He then enhanced the shapes with mixed media, mostly oil-based, layered in a dry brush fashion.

Weatherford has authored more than 30 books of poetry, nonfiction and children's literature, including *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom*, winner of an NAACP Image Award, a Caldecott Honor and the Coretta Scott King Award for Illustration. *Birmingham, 1963* won the Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award and the Jefferson Cup. Among her recent titles is *Before John Was a Jazz Giant: A Song of John Coltrane*.

Cooper has illustrated more than 60 children's books, three of which garnered Coretta Scott King Honors. He wrote and illustrated *Mandela: From the Life of the South African Statesman* and *Jump: From the Life of Michael Jordan*. His recent titles include *Tough Boy Sonatas* by Curtis L. Crisler and *Miss Crandall's School for Young Ladies & Little Misses of Color* by Elizabeth Alexander and Marilyn Nelson.

Becoming Billie Holiday

By Carole Boston Weatherford; art by Floyd Cooper

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Ages 14-up

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