



Book Review: The Book Itch: Freedom, Truth & Harlem's Greatest Bookstore

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*Knowledge is power. You need it every hour. Read a book.*

This picture book biography of Lewis Michaux, founder of the National Memorial African Bookstore in Harlem, directly addresses the theme of literature as a key to unlocking potentials and opening possibilities. *No Crystal Stair* (2012), which received a Coretta Scott King Author Honor award and a Boston Globe-Horn Book award. While *No Crystal Stair* has more than 30 narrators and was written for a teen audience, this picture book uses one narrator, his young son Lewis, to tell the story of a man who believed that books can change lives.

Lewis Michaux's dream was to establish a bookstore in Harlem that only sold books written by African Americans. The bookstore became a gathering place where many African Americans came to read, talk and purchase books, including Malcolm X, Mohammed Ali, Langston Hughes, and James Baldwin. The bookstore was founded in the 1930s but this picture book focuses on the tumultuous 1960s and Michaux's close relationship with Malcom X. Lewis Jr. invites readers into his interactions with his father, famous visitors, and the patrons who made the store a success over a 40 year period. Lewis' pride is evident as he talks about his father's perseverance, financing the store from his own money and sleeping at the store when customers stayed late, and his determination to educate the community about African American history and the racial and political issues of that time. The vibrancy of the bookstore is conveyed along with an emotional climax around the assassination of Malcom X. The book integrates Michaux's catchy slogans, such as "Don't get took! Read a Book!" and "Nobody can give you freedom. Nobody can give you equality or justice or anything. If you're a man, you take it" into the text and endpapers. His words convey both his belief in books and his commitment to black pride.

The richly textured expressionistic paintings by Christie contain bold strokes of color to depict scenes of strong emotion at the bookstore, on the streets and in the family home and to convey the role of the bookstore in the midst of the racial tensions in the 1960s. The browns and grays on the faces are contrasted against orange and yellow backgrounds to capture the strong emotions of both the famous and the ordinary people who came in contact with the bookstore. The book has back matter that includes a list of sources, author's note, and biographical notes.

The author, Vaunda Micheaux Nelson, knew little about her great uncle but was intrigued with his life story and spent years shifting through library collections, examining family archives, listening to audio recordings, and interviewing people who knew him. Her primary source was Lewis Michaux Jr. who had many memories of working alongside his father in the shop, and so she selected his voice as the narrator for this picture book follow-up to *No Crystal Stair* (2011). A

librarian who lives in New Mexico, she is the author of historical picture books that feature the lives of African Americans, including *Bad News for Outlaws: The Remarkable Life of Bass Reeves, Deputy U.S. Marshall* (2009) and *Almost to Freedom* (2003). R. Gregory Christie has won several Coretta Scott King Honor awards for his illustrations and was named to the *New York Times*' annual Best Illustrated Children's Book list. He is a freelance illustrator who has done artwork for over 50 children's books, including *Nelsons' Bad News for Outlaws*, along with album covers, newspapers, and magazines. He lives in Decatur, Georgia where he operates a children's bookstore.

This book provides many possibilities for pairings. One possibility is books about famous African Americans who visited the bookstore, such as *Malcolm X: A Fire Burning Brightly* by Walter Dean Myers (2003), *Malcom Little: The Boy Who Grew Up to Be Malcolm X* by Ilyasah Shabazz and A.G. Ford (2014), *Langston Hughes* by Alice Walker (2001), and *The Greatest: Muhammed Ali* by Walter Dean Myers (2001). Another pairing is picture books that raise issues of race, such as *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson (2001), *Freedom Summer* by Deborah Wiles (2000), *Freedom on the Menu* by Carole Boston Weathford (2007), and *Rosa* by Nikki Giovanni (2007). The book could also be paired with books about Harlem, such as *Harlem* by Walter Dean Myers (1997), *Harlem Renaissance Party* by Faith Ringgold (2015), *The Block* by Langston Hughes and Romare Bearden (1995), and *Jakes Makes a World: Jacob Lawrence, an Artist in Harlem* by Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts (2015).

The idea of an author finding one book embedded in another could be explored by pairing *The Book Itch* and *No Crystal Stair* with *The One and Only Ivan* (2012) and *Ivan: The Remarkable Story of the Shopping Mall Gorilla* (2014) by Katherine Applegate, *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* (1998) and *The Cod's Tale* (2014) by Mark Kurlansky, or *Hitler Youth* (2005) and *The Boy Who Dared* (2008) by Susan Campbell Bartoletti.

Finally, the powerful message about books as a key to possibility could be further explored by pairing this book with *More Than Anything Else* by Marie Bradby and Floyd Cooper (1995), *Richard Wright and the Library Card* by William Miller and R. Gregory Christie (1997), and *Tomás and the Library Lady* by Pat Mora and Raúl Colón (2000).

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