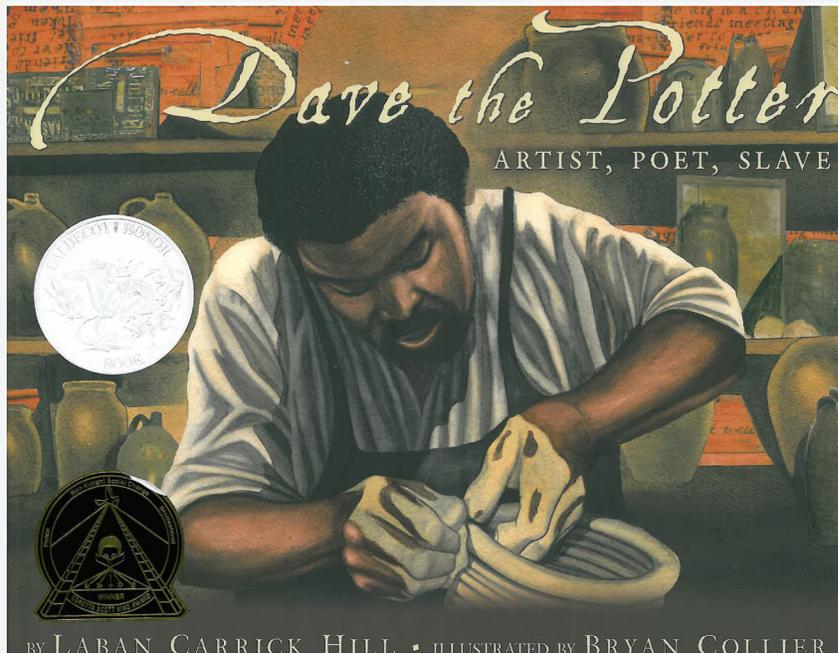


Review: Shaping Minds

Hill, Laban Carrick. *Dave the Potter: Artist, Poet, Slave*. Illus. Bryan Collier. New York: Little, Brown Book Group, 2010.

Kristina Bross



A couple summers ago, my family decided to look for books about the Civil Rights Movement of the twentieth-century. My daughters were then ages six and almost four. Their imaginations had been captured by a display of Revolutionary War picture books on display in the children's room of our local library around July 4, and we were trying to follow up on their interest in heroism and sacrifice with stories of extraordinary action that didn't have to do with war. Their takeaway anecdote from the war books involved a man who was repeatedly bayoneted and crawled to his front porch only to die in his wife's arms. I was left with my girls asking, "What's a bayonet, Mommy?" Rosa Parks and the Little Rock Nine—these are subjects well covered by good children's books and were readily available at the library and our local bookstore. Toni Morrison's *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* was a surprising hit. I'd assumed my color-craving kids wouldn't find the stark black and white photos appealing, but they found them fascinatingly real. From the twentieth-century, we made our way back in time to books about Harriet Tubman, to stories of the underground railroad, and *Henry's Freedom Box*, the story of a slave who mailed

himself to freedom, which we all read repeatedly through our three-week loan period.

When I saw *Dave the Potter: Artist, Poet, Slave* in the new books display, I latched on—my kids are blessed (or cursed—you decide) by my area of academic expertise. My research focuses on obscure colonial America texts and forgotten people, and I love finding books that help bridge the gap between what I do daily on campus and the conversations I have with my girls at home. The result, I suppose, is that they are developing a rather quirky, not-at-all-Whiggish sense of American history and culture. In any case, I'd run across the story of Dave previously in my research and was delighted that I'd get to share it with them.

Dave lived in South Carolina during and after the Civil War and is remembered as an individual because of his unusual skill as a potter. His surviving works have been prized by collectors and survive in museums. The element of his story that is particularly striking for scholars is that, in addition to being an expert craftsman, he was also literate. He inscribed many of his creations with his invented proverbs, short poems, or simply his name. As a scholar who spends much of her time trying to find archives and texts, in which the words of the marginalized survive, this was the part of his story that I particularly wanted to impress on my daughters as we read the book.

Neither, however, wanted to linger as I did over his actual words. They loved the illustrations—particularly a large, foldout page that represents Dave's creative process in four panels—but the content of his carved sentences seemed to strike them as banal. But, all is not lost; the book's creators were more savvy on this point than I. They present Dave's actual words and a brief explanation of their riddling elements in the afterword rather than folding them into the story properly, so, even if the girls aren't interested in how Dave speaks for himself through his art right now, they'll be able to return to the paratext as they mature.

If the poetry itself was not the point for them, they seemed to understand that his literacy was extraordinary. Enmeshed as they are at school in the rituals of learning to read and write, they find it shocking that there was a time when this utterly naturalized part of every kid's education today was restricted to privileged, white children, and mostly boys at that. (Consider that in my state, elementary school teachers are newly required to schedule ninety minutes of uninterrupted reading instruction each day, and, despite the fact that it's no longer mandated, my third grader is asked to practice the proper cursive slant to a different letter each night.)

The element of the book that has most impressed them, however, wasn't one I anticipated. Given our reading list in recent years, I knew that they would have the basic history of slavery and emancipation in the U.S. rattling around somewhere. I expected that this book would be of a piece with those dealing with Harriet and Henry. But, Dave's part of our history doesn't perfectly fit the narrative of abuse and resistance established by our previous readings, a fact I only registered after the girls repeatedly questioned me about

“when Dave got free.” The fact is, Dave *was* freed—by the Emancipation Proclamation, by historical circumstances rather than by direct personal action—a fact that the book registers indirectly in the afterword but does not make a part of the main text.

So, we are finding Dave’s story inspiring, but not in a way that many other picture books that deal with the history of U.S. injustices have done. In *Dave the Potter: Artist, Poet, Slave*, my children have encountered a quietly heroic story about a man who neither fought nor schemed his way out of captivity. Rather, in this book we have encountered the story of a man who used his talents and skills in the best way he could and who created a life—a dignified life at that—despite being trapped by an evil and unjust system that he could not undo or overcome by himself.

Works Cited

Levine, Ellen. *Henry’s Freedom Box*. Illus. Kadir Nelson. New York: Scholastic Press, 2007.
Morrison, Toni. *Remember: The Journey to School Integration*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Books for Children, 2004.

About the Author

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