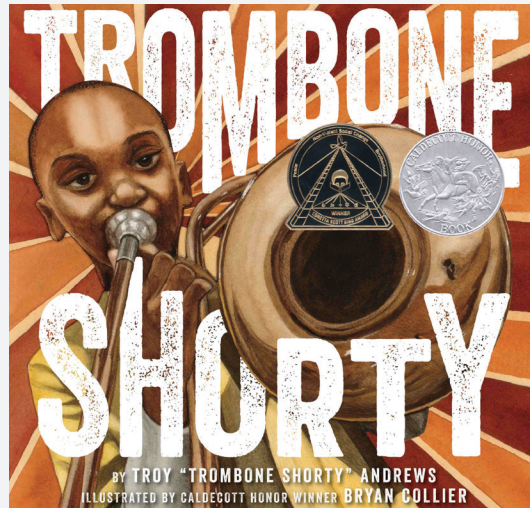


Second Reaction: A Musical and Literary Mélange

Andrews, Troy. *Trombone Shorty*. Illustrated by Bryan Collier, Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2015.

Deborah J. Bennett



It is difficult to classify the new 2016 Caldecott Honor Book and Coretta Scott King (Illustrator) award-winning children's book, *Trombone Shorty*. Is it an autobiographical tale? Is it a story of New Orleans? Is it a celebration of jazz? Like the jambalaya that is featured in the book written by Troy Andrews (aka Trombone Shorty) and illustrated by Bryan Collier, it is a mix of everything in the pantry.

"Where y'at?," characters call throughout the story. This local phrase for hello, written in a jaunty, graphic font, caught the eye of my seven-year-old daughter, an aspiring musician: "The words were just like the pictures, drawn with passion!" Trombone Shorty and famed illustrator Bryan Collier fill this story with the sights, sounds, and flavors of the Big Easy, making this not just a tale of a musical prodigy, but also of Tremé, the first African American neighborhood in the United States.

The author highlights the jazz tradition in the neighborhood by writing about the "music floating in the air" (unpaged), depicted by Collier as colorful balloons rising above Tremé residents' heads. During Mardi Gras, brass bands parade across the pages and the streets just a few blocks away from the French Quarter (Wikitravel.org). Collier adds a dash of realism with collages of watercolors overlaid with photographs. He also manages to blend the senses in his images by depicting sounds emanating from instruments as transparent waves that swirl

around the characters and even waft through the kitchen as jambalaya cooks on the stove. This sweep of ideas and images made my daughter feel connected to the musicians and neighbors who come together as a community to enjoy the brass bands and “forget about their troubles for a little while” (unpaged). Music and food are binding agents in this story that draw readers, young and old, into this world of art, perseverance, and tradition.

Of course, before Trombone Shorty can march in a brass band, he must first find an instrument. He and his friends piece together instruments out of found objects, like Big Wheels and empty bottles, until one day he finds a discarded trombone that is twice the size of the five-year-old “Shorty.” My daughter, also a bit undersized, felt inspired by this young boy who gets his first break on one of the biggest stages in music, the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival. Standing in the crowd, too short to see the musicians on stage, Shorty gets caught up in the moment and raises his trombone to his lips to play along with the professional musicians. Bo Diddley stops the show and calls the youngster up on stage, who promptly steps up to the mic and says, “Follow me!” (unpaged).

This leads to an even greater honor—Trombone Shorty’s brother asks him to join his band, extending a long tradition of musicians in the family. After gaining fame as the “kid” in the band, he goes on to form his own combo, Trombone Shorty & Orleans Avenue, named after a street in Tremé. Now a full-sized adult, Trombone Shorty tours widely, but, as he writes, “when I’m home, I make sure to keep my eyes on the younger musicians in town and help them out, just like my brother did for me” (unpaged).

My daughter, who has followed in the footsteps of her own brothers—a cellist and a drummer—said she was ready to pick up a brass instrument next. Like Shorty, she has been playing an instrument larger than her compact frame: the double bass. Her opportunity to play in an orchestra was provided by *El Sistema*, the famed Venezuelan program developed to give children in poor communities access to music. As founder Dr. José Antonio Abreu wrote, “A child’s physical poverty is overcome by the spiritual richness that music provides” (Radcliffe). This echoes a sentiment we found in Trombone Shorty’s book: “People didn’t have a lot of money in Tremé, but we always had a lot of music” (unpaged).

When my daughter and I closed the book on this rich world of music and imagery, she pointed to the award stickers on the cover and said, “I agree with those. I think this book is great. It’s a winner!” I traced the words on the Corretta Scott King Award sticker—peace, non-violent social change, and brotherhood. I reflected on Trombone Shorty’s journey as a musician—he gained fame because of the juxtaposition of his size and the “musical gumbo” emanating from his trumpet. However, he became a great musician because of his drive and passion, in addition to countless hours of practice. He was spurred on by the support of his family, friends, and neighbors, who made joyful noises in the streets and churches of Tremé. If his brother hadn’t encouraged him, and if his mother hadn’t lifted him up on her shoulders when Bo Diddley called out to the crowd to find out who was playing along, Trombone Shorty never would have

made it to the White House to perform for the president. More importantly, he never would have gone on to create the Trombone Shorty Foundation and the music academy by the same name to help other children growing up in neighborhoods like Tremé “make [their] dreams take flight” (unpaged). Through their art, Trombone Shorty and Bryan Collier have promoted a brotherhood and a sisterhood to inspire generations to come.

Works Cited

Radcliffe, Harry A., II. “El Sistema: Changing Lives Through Music—Bob Simon On Venezuela’s Groundbreaking Musical Education Program.” *CBS News*, 11 Apr. 2008, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/el-sistema-changing-lives-through-music/>.
Wikitravel. “New Orleans/Tremé.” http://wikitravel.org/en/New_Orleans/Trem%C3%A9.

About the Author

Deborah J. Bennett, while not a professional musician herself, is surrounded by musicians, at home and at work. A language professor in the Liberal Arts Department at Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts, she is inspired as a writer by her talented students and colleagues, who hail from around the globe and play music as varied as their origins. Her poems and essays have appeared in *Salamander*, *Artlines 2*, *FUSION*, *Cognoscenti*, and *Edify*. She often cooks dinner while her children bow, pluck, and drum away.