



Birmingham, 1963

Carole Boston Weatherford

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A poetic tribute to the victims of the racially motivated church bombing that served as a seminal event in the struggle for civil rights. In 1963, the eyes of the world were on Birmingham, Alabama, a flashpoint for the civil rights movement. Birmingham was one of the most segregated cities in the United States. Civil rights demonstrators were met with police dogs and water cannons. On Sunday, September 15, 1963, members of the Ku Klux Klan planted sticks of dynamite at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, which served as a meeting place for civil rights organizers. The explosion killed four little girls. Their murders shocked the nation and turned the tide in the struggle for equality. A Jane Addams Children's Honor Book, here is a book that captures the heartbreak of that day, as seen through the eyes of a fictional witness. Archival photographs with poignant text written in free verse offer a powerful tribute to the young victims.

Birmingham, 1963 Details

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Author : Carole Boston Weatherford

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From Reader Review Birmingham, 1963 for online ebook

Q_Ayana says

Birmingham, 1963 shares a fictional account of an eye-witness, in “the year I turned ten,” to the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, a meeting place for civil rights organizers. In this tragic event, the Ku Klux Klan planted nineteen sticks of dynamite under the steps of the church, and in the aftermath, four young girls were killed – Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, and Carole Robertson.

Weatherford’s free verse poetry is written in such a way that it softens the horrendousness of the hate crime for the reader, although the black and white photographs do not. The images shown depict the good and bad, yet memorable, moments of the Civil Rights Movement (i.e. The Children’s March, the March on Washington, signs of segregation, and the explosion at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church). Towards the end, there are poems and photos shared in memoriam of each of the four girls’ lives. To help explain the details of the event, there is an author’s note and notes about the photographs provided at the end of the book.

This book reminds me of another book that I read, A Sweet Smell of Roses (2004) by Angela Johnson. Both of these books highlight the impact of the Civil Rights Movement on the children of the time period, and creatively explain their involvement in the movement. I think that Weatherford does a wonderful job at making such a vivid tragedy child-appropriate. This book would be most appropriate for students who have some background about the Civil Rights Movement, especially the violent aspects that occurred.

Juliana Chau says

2007. Poetry/ historical non-fiction. A really moving and enlightening picture book in verse about the tragic racially motivated bombing in a church during the civil rights movement.

Phil Mitchell says

I'm a big fan of the civil rights era. This a great book to start off a group of young students. It really does justice for those who lost their lives in the church bombing. It also gives a non-biased introduction to the people who were involved in the bombing, meaning the reader knows they were guilty and there was no need to vilify them. The pictures and illustrations are great and this is the major elemental portion that does this book enough good to keep it from a three star rating. Its not a 5 because its not a feel good story. It leaves the reader feeling sorry for the little ones killed and anger towards those that would not only bomb a house of the lord, but kill its guests as well. I would use it in my classroom.

Paige Y. says

The day I turned ten
Our church was quiet. No meetings, no marches.
Mama left me in Sunday school
With a soft kiss and coins for the offering plate.

With a seemingly simple free verse poem, Carole Boston Weatherford has brought us compelling account of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church that killed four young girls. Photographs of the Civil Rights Movement and of the aftermath of the bombing illustrate the pages.

This is an incredibly moving book. Even though I read it in five minutes, I found myself going back, re-reading, and carefully studying the photographs. I learned things too – I had no idea that children were so important in the Birmingham marches. I cannot imagine sending either of my daughters out to march in such a volatile situation, yet 2,500 children participated. The notes on the photographs were also informative.

Tressa says

Carole Boston Weatherford's *Birmingham, 1963* tells the story of the darkest day in Birmingham's history: the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Because the church was centrally located and had a large basement perfect for meetings, it became a rallying place for the movement and many protests were staged there. This act of terror would become known as the "blast heard around the world," and was one of several bombings that earned Birmingham the nickname "Bombingham."

Birmingham, 1963 is told through the eyes of a ten-year-old girl, who along with her family is not just an observer but a participant in the Civil Rights Movement. She is witness to Martin Luther King's stirring speech at the March on Washington, sits in protest at whites-only lunch counters, and is arrested along with hundreds of other young participants in the Children's Crusade.

"The year I turned ten
I missed school to march with other children
For a seat at whites-only lunch counters.

Like a junior choir, we chanted 'We Shall Overcome.'
Then, police loosed snarling dogs and fire hoses on us,
And buses carted us, nine hundred strong, to jail."

Details of the girl's daily life reveal a subtle transition from child to young adult, and we can't help but think of four other girls who will never get to sing another solo, dance with their fathers, or grow into women.

"The day I turned ten
I rehearsed my Youth Day solo in the full-length mirror.
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.

But Mama allowed my my first sip of coffee
And Daddy twirled me around the kitchen
In my patent-leather cha-cha heels."

And then the family of four pile into the car and listen to gospel radio as they drive to church. At 10:22 a.m. the destruction of the heart of the movement in Birmingham is complete, except for one lone stained glass window depicting Christ with his face blown out:

"The day I turned ten
Someone tucked a bundle of dynamite
Under the church steps, then lit the fuse of hate."

10:22 a.m. The clock stopped, and Jesus' face
Was blown out of the only stained-glass window
Left standing—the one where He stands at the door.
The Lord is my shepherd, said the pastor on a megaphone.

The only fatalities that day were four young girls—Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, and Carole Robertson—although twenty-one others were injured. Martin Luther King gave the eulogy at a joint funeral for three of the girls, and 8,000 people came to mourn their deaths. The bombing did exactly the opposite of what the terrorists had planned: instead of paralyzing the movement, it lit a fire under its feet and led to the signing of the Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964.

Birmingham, 1963 is a realistic but gentle introduction for children to the church bombing. The book ends with a poetic tribute to the four youngest victims.

babyhippoface says

This a picture book that works on a young adult level as well. Archival photos paired with spare poetic verses work extremely well together, resulting in a brief but strong message. I was especially interested in the photo of the one stained glass window that survived the bombing, a window of Jesus; although the window was not shattered, Jesus' face was blown out. I never knew that, and found it quite symbolic.

I never figured out what the red shapes were supposed to represent (besides blood, of course); I couldn't make sense of them.

Still, this is a very good book for introducing young readers to the terror of 1963 "Bomingham".

Katie Carson says

Very powerful book written in a contemporary poetry style. The poem tells the true story of four African American girls who were killed when the Ku Klux Klan placed sticks of dynamite in their church. Told from a fictional narrator, this book offers insight into the innocence of these young girls and the implications this tragedy had on other African American girls at the time.

Gripping black and white photos highlighted with red captivate the reader's attention. The image of a stained-glass window of Jesus with his face blown out from the explosion provides a harsh reality to readers as well.

Mackenzie Midles says

Birmingham, 1963 is a narrative poem that takes places during the Civil Rights movement that fought for justice and integration of African Americans throughout the United States, especially in the south. This book displays the tragic event that happened in Birmingham, Alabama on September 15th, 1963 through the use of its writing and real photographs that were taken during this time in history. On September 15th, 1963 The Klu Klux Klan planted dynamite on the outside steps of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church injuring twenty and taking the lives of four innocent girls: Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, and Carole Robertson.

This book reaches the minimum criteria needed for NBGS in portraying both cultural accuracy and authenticity of characters and providing in-depth treatment of cultural issues. Birmingham, 1963 uses real photography that was taken during this movement, allowing readers to see events that happened. The photograph that mostly concerned me was of a man dressed in white cloak with two spots cut out for each eye. This was photograph of a member from the Klu Klux Klan. These members harassed, threatened and murdered African Americans along with anyone who fought beside them. This one picture shows its readers the horror and power that the Klu Klux Klan had over their community.

The book reaches the criteria using in-depth cultural issues by just the poem itself which is about racial hatred shown against African Americans. The sacrifice and tears that activists experienced during the Civil Right Movement are unbelievable, and this book well portrays one of the most devastating events that happened. This book is well written in very simplistic detail for any readers to understand. It is a wonderful tool for readers to comprehend the racial barriers that most whites felt against African Americans during this era, and the racial hatred they experienced.

Taleah says

I chose to rate this book 5 stars and add it to my favorites because it does a really good job of giving students and understanding and realistic glimpse into a very painful part of American history. I think this short story really helps bring history to life, especially from a child's perspective.

This book would be a really great addition to a classroom read aloud for grades 3-5, or as a resource to understand American history and the civil rights movement for grades 4-8. Though the narrator is fictional, the book is filled with actual photographs from the civil rights movement of 1963 and actual descriptions of how children and students participated in the protests and were affected by the violence.

Genre: historical fiction & historical nonfiction

Reading level: 4.4

Josh says

Just a good quick read to learn from our past.

Hayley Larson says

Told in poetry format this was a story that told about a true bombing which took place in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 which killed young girls. There was a very informative back section that explained some about the civil rights movement and how children were used in the fight against racism when adults didn't want to lose their jobs. The poem itself, the book explained, was not entirely true, but the historical events in it were. I felt real emotion when I read this book and found myself with tears in my eyes when it showcased short biographies of the young girls that died, accompanied by photos of them. It was a very good book, probably for fifth or middle graders and above.

Esther says

Published in 2007 by Wordsong.

Interest Level: 6th-10th Grade

This is a book of poetry is from the perspective of young girl in Birmingham who eventually faces a gruesome death due to her race. This book chronicles part of the Civil Rights Movement through poetry and vivid pictures that portray various aspects of the struggle for equal rights. The young girl's voice is heard throughout the photographs as narrations of each event. Eventually, the girl faces her death and her name is revealed to be a compilation of the voices of several girls that perished in the same way and place. The pace and tone of this book are quick and somewhat fearful. Each poem increases the intensity of the events and creates a stir of emotion in the reader. The point of view explored also creates a sense of innocence and faith that push the reader to want to find out if the main character succeeds in her struggle for equal rights.

Although this is a short book, I think that the verse and photographs meld gracefully and allow the reader to move along with the events that seem to happen so quickly. At the end, the author pays homage to the girls that perished and there is an author's note about the various events presented and the photographs in the book. Each page is stylized with red streaks juxtaposed against the black and white photos and pages, which gives the impression of conflict between white and black as well as of the impending devastating events.

Teri Weaver says

Because of the narration and free verse form of this book, the Civil Rights experience comes alive on the page for all who read this book. The compelling photographs portray a people who fought against inequality. The text highlights the role of the church and non-violent protest provided a way to push for equal rights for African-Americans. The text describing how local law authorities used dogs and high-powered fire hoses to stop protesters, along with the arrest of 900 children further indicates the strong resistance the protestors faced. Using the fictional eyewitness account to place the narrator in the children's choir helps the reader to realize that the four female victims of violence were real people. The use of gospel hymns showcases how music attempted to assuage the pain of the people in Birmingham. The quiet memoriams of the four girls further enhances their dashed dreams. The Civil Rights struggle is clearly defined in this text. The author's note mentions that the people of Birmingham did not receive the convictions of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombers until 39 years later because evidence was blocked by a federal government employee. This book offers excellent black and white photos along with compelling free verse to help students understand what it was like to live in Birmingham in the 1960s.

Christopher says

I thought this book was very much in tune with the Civil Rights Movement and the racism that was so prevalent in Birmingham and many other southern cities and states during 1963 and years earlier as well as years later. This is a book in which your emotions will either allow you to be angry or sad or both. This book is a recommendation by me because this a must read for parents to their 5th grade and older children who are or will be intrigued by the artwork and the emotional context being read to them. The 4 young girls that were killed in that church was and is a tragic case of hate because of a person's color being different that yours. It's up to parents to take the lead and make a change which can help all in a more harmonious way.

Alexandra Sinkus says

Genre: Poetry

Awards: 2008 Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award, 2008 Jefferson Cup Award, Jane Addams Children's Book Award, Books for Older Readers Honor Book, Lion and the Unicorn Award for Excellence in North American Poetry Honor Book, Best Children's Books of 2008 —Christian Science Monitor

Grade Level: 5-6

Even though it is a short book, I found it very moving. The free-verse mixed with the actual photographs was something that really hits the heart. I would include this for older students since it talks a lot about violence but that is - sadly - typical for 1960's south. I would use this book during Black History Month or when learning about Civil Rights. I would have the kids write their own free verse about an event that happened.
