

FREE AT LAST!: Stories and Songs of Emancipation

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Review

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Rappaport, Doreen and Illustrated by Evans, Shane W. *FREE AT LAST!:* *Stories and Songs of Emancipation*. Candlewick Press, \$19.99 ISBN 763614408

Leaders in liberation

Introducing young readers to social change

The first word that comes to mind when describing Doreen Rappaport's picture book **FREE AT LAST!** is bold--from the daring language to Shane W. Evans' powerful, direct, and personal illustrations. The book traces the lives of Southern blacks from the time of the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation to the middle of the 1950s when the doctrine of separate but equal was declared unconstitutional and integration was on the horizon.

FREE AT LAST! introduces young readers to the stories of those who fought hard for their freedom, overcoming obstacles along the way. They will meet Booker T. Washington, Ida B. Wells, Langston Hughes, Jackie Robinson and Thurgood Marshall as well as people not so well known. It is the stories of the unknown heroes--Jane Kemper, Harriet Postle, John Solomon Lewis, to name a few--where the tragedy of the times and the personal struggles and sacrifices involved are perhaps the most pronounced. Jane Kemper crawled through the night in search of her children who had been stolen from her former master. Harriet Postle hid her husband and protected her children from an angry mob of men with pistols. And John Solomon Lewis stood up to the captain of a boat headed for Kansas so that his family and many others could leave the South for a better life up North.

Doreen Rappaport's dependence on first-person accounts to tell the stories is what makes them so powerful. Also interspersed throughout **FREE AT LAST!** are poems and songs, some written at the time and some later. Rappaport also does not shy away from uncomfortable details, insisting on presenting young readers with an accurate picture of these troubled times.

These were also times of strength and hope, and Rappaport points to the comfort and force of family, church, and community. In particular, Rappaport examines Harlem in the 1920s, where racial consciousness and artistic expression were explored and celebrated in a community that inspired political leaders, historians, dancers, artists, musicians, and poets. Communities were also created around education and politics, and Rappaport devotes time to the evolution of Tuskegee Institute and the NAACP.

Artist and illustrator Shane W. Evans shares Rappaport's determination to convey the joy and pain of the times. His stark, four-color illustrations capture a range of emotions: torment, frustration, determination, joy, and bravery. In the Artist's Note, Evans talks about the deeper consequence of this history. He writes that history does not really belong to one people but to all of us and should be renamed ourstory. We are all connected, and the joy and pain that visits others will visit us because it is our joy and pain.

Although **FREE AT LAST!** is a 64-page picture book, its language and concepts are at times too sophisticated for a very young reader. Rappaport also assumes the reader is familiar with some of the background of key events and with some of the artists featured. For these reasons, I would recommend the book for grade four and up.

Rappaport recognizes that there is much more to know and learn about the featured people, places and events and has included a detailed timeline and thorough resource section for further study. She and Evans have captured the essence of the times, but more importantly, they have encouraged us to learn more, and to better understand ourselves.

One sticky note: Though the book suggests Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation eight months after the start of the Civil War on April 12 1861, it was actually issued 21 months after the bombing of Fort Sumter.

Carolyn P. Yoder was recently named editor of Calkins Creek Books, the U.S. history imprint of Boyds Mills Press in Honesdale, PA. She lives in Lawrenceville, NJ.