



FOURTEEN MUST-READ AFRICAN-AMERICAN BOOKS

Belton, Sandra. **McKendree**. During the summer of 1948, fourteen year old Tilara Haynes heads to West Virginia to visit her aunt. Tilara has always had poor self-esteem but through volunteer work at McKendree, the local home for elderly African-Americans, she discovers her own beauty. Written in a lovely lyrical style, **McKendree** also explores racism within the African-American culture. One of the indelible images of **McKendree** is the beautifully descriptive phrases that Ms. Belton uses to describe different skin hues. *Middle/High School*.

Bond, Adrienne. **Sugarcane House and Other Stories About Mr. Fat**. Humor is one of the most difficult genres to write but Adrienne Bond does it wonderfully in this series of tales about runaway slave Mr. Fat and his sassy mule Brownie. Mr. Fat cheats the cheaters, turns Brownie's suicide attempt into good fortune for them both and always manages, by hook or by crook, to save the day. *Elementary/Middle School*

Hamilton, Virginia. **The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl**. Virginia Hamilton is well known for her wonderful retellings of African-American legends and she uses her extensive knowledge of myth, legend and folklore to good end in the wholly original story about a god, Pretty Pearl, who is curious about and rather fond of human beings. Journeying with her brother, best god John de Conquer, she comes down from the mountain, sails on a slave ship for America and sees the suffering of the slaves. Knowing it is her time to act, Brother John grants her human status but leaves her with a warning; "Them human bein's be awful tricky." *Middle/High School*.

Hansen, Joyce. **I Thought My Soul Would Rise and Fly**. Using journals and diaries of the period Ms Hansen has done a marvelous job of creating an authentic voice in this fictional diary of a young slave starting at the very moment of emancipation. Walking with a limp and speaking with a stutter, everyone thinks Patsy a dunce, but having secretly taught herself to read and write before freedom, she now uses her skill to record the events at the heart of this critical turning point in Black history. We witness through her eyes the emotional turmoil of freed slaves leaving to find family, the promise of a school unfulfilled and, by her reluctant admission of her abilities, her journey to becoming "little teacher" for the plantation community. *Elementary/Middle School*.

Hurmence, Belinda. **Tancy**. Winner of the Golden Kite Award, **Tancy** is the powerful story of the favored house slave on the Gaither Plantation who sets off after emancipation to find her mother. Rich in details of the Reconstruction period, we are privy to Tancy's elations and disappointments in her first fledgling steps as a freed slave as well as the difficulties of former masters adjusting to an entirely new way of life.

Lester, Julius. **Long Journey Home: Stories From Black History**. Few anthologies produce more than one or two good stories but in **Long Journey Home**, Julius Lester has given us six powerful stories, all based on fact, and spanning the period just prior to, and just after, freedom. A personal favorite for reading aloud is "The Man Who Was a Horse", the story of Bob Lemmons, a freed slave on a Texas ranch and the only man alive who can bring in a herd of mustangs single handed. *Middle/High School*

Lester, Julius. **Sam and the Tigers**. In this whimsical and rich retelling, actually restructuring, of *Little Black Sambo*, Julius Lester brings us humor, warmth and a richness of language rarely found in children's books. Perfectly complimented by Jerry Pinkney's marvelous illustrations, this is one of my all-time favorite books to read aloud. *Elementary School*.

McKissack, Patricia. **The Dark-Thirty: Southern Tales of the Supernatural.** **The Dark-Thirty** is best described by a passage from master storyteller Patricia McKissack herself. “The Dark-Thirty is a collection of stories rooted in African-American history and the oral storytelling tradition. They should be shared at the special time of day when it is neither day nor night and when shapes and shadows play tricks on the mind. When you feel fear tingling in your toes and zinging up your spine like a closing zipper, you have experienced the delicious horror of a tale of the dark-thirty.” *All ages.*

McKissack, Patricia. **Porch Lies: Tales of Slicksters, Tricksters, and Other Wily Characters.** Based on Ms McKissack’s memories of summers spent listening to stories on her grandparents porch in Nashville, Tennessee, this is storytelling at its very best. Meet Dooley Hunter who wins the State Liars’ competition, or Noble “Cake” Norris, who some folks believe may have died twenty-seven times. Dooley and Noble are waiting along with a cast of other wily folk... just as soon as you make the lemonade. *All ages.*

Morrison, Toni. **The Bluest Eye.** **The Bluest Eye** is Toni Morrison’s first and, arguably, her most powerful work. In this African-American masterwork, the brutality of racism is explored through the life of Pecola Breedlove, a young black woman growing up in Ohio in the 1940s. Surrounded by icons of white society and abused by her family, Pecola is driven into madness where she finds a glimmer of hope, believing that her eyes are the bluest. *High School.*

Robinet, Harriette Gillem. **Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule.** When the Civil War ended, it was rumored that freed slaves would get “Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule”. Young Gideon said that land meant freedom, but when he and his twelve-year-old brother, Pascal, and eight-year-old friend Nelly run away in search of their forty acres, they don’t find things as simple as they thought. Joined by other former slaves, they do finally find a farm, and a school, but it is their dignity that is their greatest treasure. *Elementary/Middle School.*

Sebestyen, Ouida. **Words by Heart.** **Words by Heart** is one of only two books on this list that is not written by an African-American author but that shouldn’t deter you from reading this incredible book. In 1910, young Lena and her family move to the small southwestern town of Bethel Springs where her father hopes they can better their lives. Unfortunately they are the only black family in the town and some frightening events indicate that some people would prefer their town to stay all white. Although on its surface **Words by Heart** is a novel about racism, it is ultimately a life-affirming story of personal growth and forgiveness. *Middle/High School*

Taylor, Mildred D. **Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry.** Winner of the prestigious Newbery Medal, **Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry**, is one of those rare books that sets the standard by which other works are judged. Taking place in Mississippi in the 1930s, it chronicles a year in the life on nine-year-old Cassie Logan and her family. Beset by countless acts of racist terror, they none-the-less survive through their love and loyalty to each other and a strong sense of pride. As with all great books, the whole is so much greater than the parts. This is historical fiction at its very best. *Middle/High School.*

Thomas, Joyce Carol. **Marked by Fire.** Winner of both The National Book Award and the American Book Award, *Booklist* calls **Marked by Fire** “A lyrical celebration of black womanhood tempered by both pain and joy”. Taking place in a small, tightly-knit African-American community in Oklahoma, this incredible book spans a 20-year period in the life of Abyssinia Jackson as she comes of age, through natural disaster and personal attacks, with determination and dignity. “I am but a cinder in the snow. Who could gaze at me long and deny I passed through fire.” *Middle/High School.*