

## *Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer: Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement* Book Review

By Charlene V. Martoni

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**Title:** *Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer: Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement*

**Author:** Carol B. Weatherford

**Illustrator:** Euka Holmes

**Genre:** Picture book, nonfiction, biography

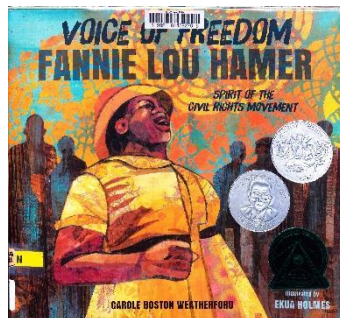
**Age Range:** 11-13

**Grade Level:** 6-8

**Lexile Measure:** 820L

**MLA 8 Citation:** Weatherford, Carol. *Voice of Freedom: Fanny Lou Hammer: Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement*. Candlewick Press, 2015

According to *From Cover to Cover: Evaluating and Reviewing Children's Books* by Kathleen T. Horning, picture books are “meant to be read aloud while children view the illustrations” (85). Though the Caldecott Medal terms do state that the award should go annually to the *artist* of the most distinguished American picture book for children, the criteria section states that other components of the book are to be considered (2008). Horning stresses that, when evaluating picture books, a critic should consider both the artwork and the text, and how the two elements work together (85).



*Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer: Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement* (2015) by Carole Boston Weatherford is illustrated by Euka Holmes. The book is Holmes' picture book debut, yet Weatherford's book, *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom*, also received a Caldecott Honor. In addition to winning the 2016 Caldecott Medal, *Voice of Freedom* is a 2016 Robert F. Silbert Honor Book, and it also won the 2016 Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award for New Talent. For the book's illustrations, Holmes uses a mixed medium with rough visual textures and a folk art style that reflects the aesthetic values of African American culture.



Within both realistic and abstract shapes, Holmes collages patterns from found materials to bring small but important elements of the book's narrative into its imagery. For example, she uses patterns from sheet music and maps throughout the book. On pages 8 and 9 (left), these patterns mirror the text, which explains that the main character's brothers and sisters moved up north in hopes of finding a

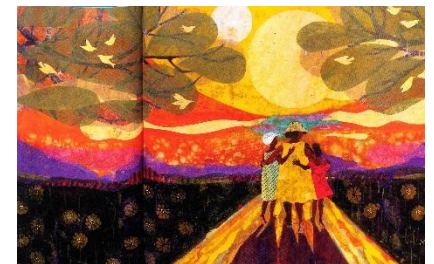
higher paying job and a better life (9). The text also says that her mother would sing “songs that really sang down in [her], powerful message songs” (9). Holmes also uses printmaking techniques, overlaying her collages with patterns that convey a sense of distant memory.



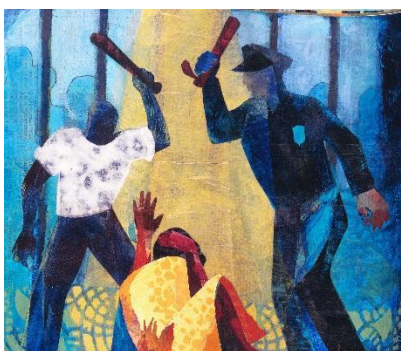
Some of Holmes' illustrations (left) are warm and rich, using muted yellows, browns, and greens to convey the warmth of working under the hot sun (1). Others (right) are cool and earthy, with very muted greens and browns that convey the relief felt when the sun sets (2-3). Other (below) illustrations are bold and vibrant, conveying a longing for the main character's roots in Africa (28).



Some compositions (left) include faces that dominate the page, while other compositions (right) use contrasting elements to add boldness (12, 13, & 37). Motherhood is depicted tenderly in the composition on the right. Other compositions (below) make use of alternating shapes to point out a repeating problem (34 & 35).



Overall, the artwork in *Voice of Freedom* is stunning. One can see why the 2016 Caldecott Medal was awarded to Holmes. However, again, Horning emphasizes the need to evaluate picture books for both illustrations *and* text. Horning states that, because picture books are meant to be read to a child by a fluent reader, “in order for a picture book to find true success, it must be good enough to spark this symbiotic relationship” (87). Most picture books, therefore, “are written at a reading level that is much higher than that of a child in first grade” (114).



The book's Lexile level is 820L, and it's developmentally appropriate for children ages 11 to 13. This is, no doubt, due to the very text-heavy narrative on a complex topic that

requires critical thinking skills and empathy. The story is, however, written beautifully, from the perspective of Fannie Lou Hamer, in a realistic dialect. It does not glaze over difficult topics like, for example, racism, slavery, Jim Crow laws, forced sterilization, the KKK, and even extreme violence. For example, the image (left) on page 20 depicts Hammer being beaten by a police officer and another man, and the text on the accompanying page says, "They just kept beating me, the jailers telling me, *You nigger bitch, we're gonna make you wish you were dead*" (21). Parents may want to evaluate the appropriateness of these topics for their specific children before reading it together,.

### **Works Cited:**

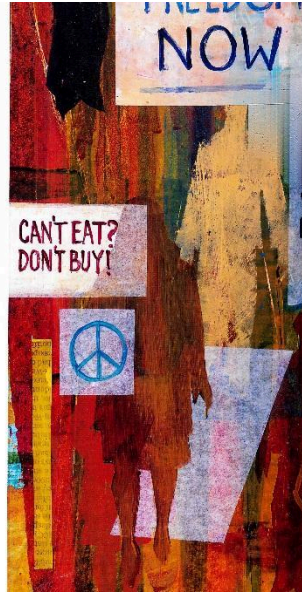
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### America's Problem

On my fund-raising tour, I called racism  
*America's problem. Whatever you give,*  
I told the crowd, *it's not only to free me in Mississippi,*  
*but it's also to free yourselves*  
*because no man is an island.*  
Racists can be some kind of rats, though.  
In 1967, my daughter Dorothy took sick  
after her second child was born.  
I drove more than ninety miles  
all the way to Memphis, Tennessee,  
to find a hospital that treat blacks.  
Then, right outside the hospital main entrance,  
my Dorothy passed away in my arms.  
Gone—just like that 'cause she sick  
and couldn't get enough to eat.  
Now me and Pap got grandbabies to raise.

I prayed their future would be brighter.  
In 1967, Robert Clark, a Freedom Democrat,  
cracked the door to the statehouse.  
He was the first black person elected  
to the Mississippi legislature since Reconstruction—  
when slavery had just ended.  
In 1968, Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy,  
a senator running for president,  
were both killed. Those were dark days.

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### The Beating

In June 1963, I went to citizenship school  
in South Carolina. On the way back,  
the bus had stopped in Columbus, Mississippi.  
Me and the other trainees was hungry  
and decided to try to eat in the terminal.  
We ordered breakfast at the whites-only lunch counter,  
knowing segregation been outlawed.  
After a long wait, we was finally served.  
But the bus driver called the police,  
and down the road in Winona  
we got kicked off the bus and thrown in jail.

When I asked what was the charges,  
the police told me to shut up.  
They put us in separate cells  
and made other prisoners beat us.  
Black and blue. They just kept beating me,  
the jailers telling me, *You nigger bitch,*  
*we're gonna make you wish you were dead.*  
Through the pain, I quoted Scripture.

One prisoner beat me till we were both exhausted.  
Then the other took over.  
I waited three days for a doctor to show up.

SNCC sent someone to bail us out,  
but the police locked him up and beat him, too.  
It took Andrew Young  
from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference  
to get us released—the same day NAACP leader  
Medgar Evers was slain in his driveway  
for teaching black people their rights.  
The others said it was my singing  
what brought them through.

That November, John F. Kennedy was killed  
and Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in as president.  
He promised Dr. King to finish what Kennedy couldn't.  
In July 1964, Johnson signed the Civil Rights Bill into law.  
The blood of freedom fighters was in his pen.

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In conclusion, I do see why this book won the Caldecott Medal in 2016. Both the illustrations and the text are integral to the story and work together to inform children about a very important person in our country and culture's history. The book is also engaging to both children and adults, with the images and story dynamic enough to hold a child's attention and the text appropriate for adults. Due to my disciplines, I felt a strong connection to the book and would most definitely read it to children in my own life.