



People often ask me how to expand the study of Black history in the library and classroom, beyond Black History Month. It's a question that leaves me scratching my head because the answer, in my humble opinion, is simple: Expand Black history in the library and classroom beyond Black History Month.

Black History Is American History

WHY WE SHOULD CELEBRATE YEAR ROUND

Don Tate

dontate2@gmail.com

Years ago in grade school, I sat in a room filled with Black children and parents, about to celebrate Kwanzaa, a seven-day, African-American culture celebration. It was held at the Black Theology Center (the Center for Study and Application of Black Theology) in the heart of the Black community in Des Moines, Iowa, where I grew up. The center's mission was to help foster an awareness of the need for Black unity, pride, and self-identity.

Parents were dressed in colorful dashikis and wore large proud Afros. Tables were decorated with kinaras—seven-branched candleholders with red, black, and green candles—and with foods that represented a plentiful harvest.

The evening opened with the singing of the Black National Anthem “Lift

Every Voice and Sing” by James Weldon Johnson. The celebration continued as we played games like marbles and Mancala, the oldest game in the world, which originated in Africa. We recited Kwanzaa’s Seven Principles: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith.

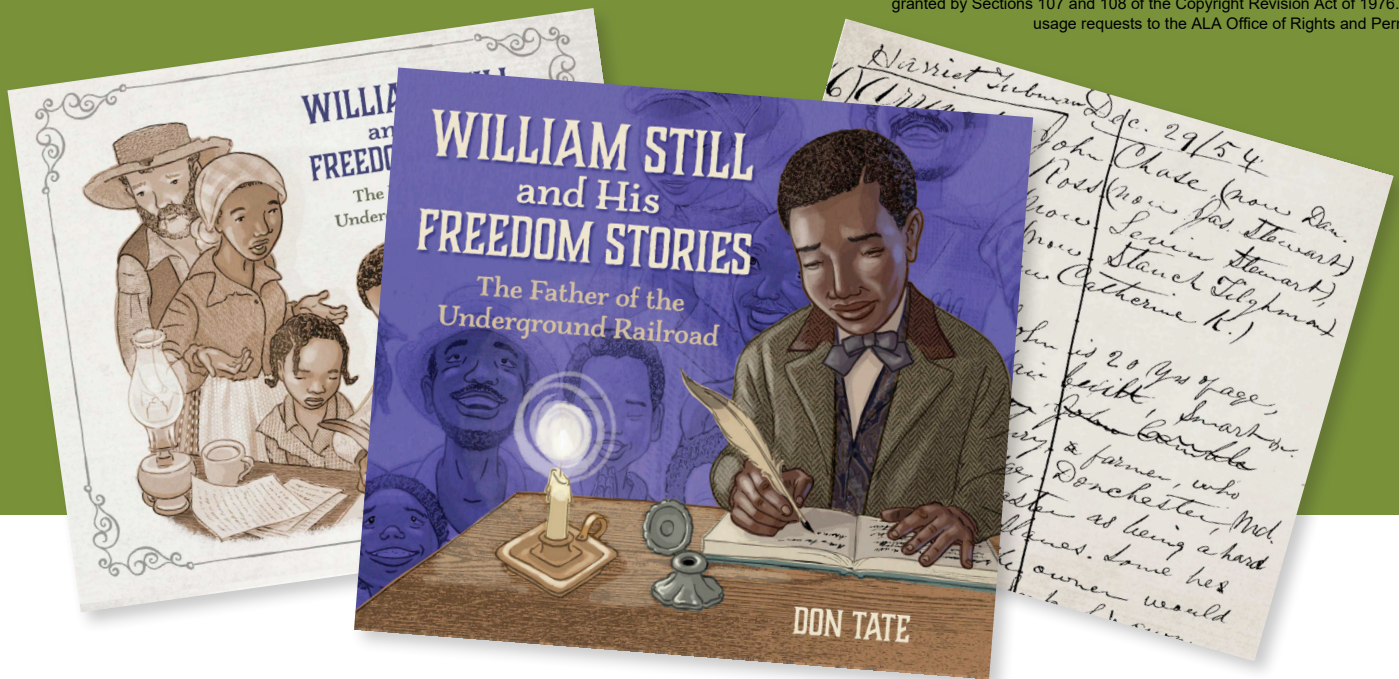
A month later, we celebrated Black History Month, with musical productions and plays. But that observation didn’t end on February 28. We learned about all sorts of Black historical figures year round, such as Harriet Tubman, Marcus Garvey, Mary McLeod Bethune, Booker T. Washington, and others.

Fast forward a few years later, when, for whatever reason, my family no longer participated in the center’s programs. I entered fifth grade and

was bused to a school farther away, in a more affluent area of town that was mostly white. I was the only Black kid in many of my classes. We had no Black teachers.

In history classes, there was no mention of Blacks—or any other kinds of people, for that matter. We studied world explorers, like Christopher Columbus and Ferdinand Magellan, who were white. We learned about the Founding Fathers and the Framers of the Constitution, like George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson, who were also all white. And then there were the great American inventors, like Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, and Henry Ford—white, white, and white.

Then came Black History Month, where we learned about the “slaves.” Then we learned more about the “slaves.” And even more about the



“slaves.” These lessons usually came through bite-size blurbs in text-heavy books, books that told stories that dehumanized Black people as objects who were beaten, burned, bombed, or whatever white people wanted to do to them. Unlike today, there weren’t many picture book biographies that allowed readers to get to know Black people as human beings, who like to learn, create, love, dream—who make important contributions to our world.

From my studies at the Black Theology Center, I knew there was more to Black history and Black people than what was being taught at that mostly white school. But I was a shy kid who would never speak up.

I am fifty-seven years old today but in many ways, I am still that shy kid. Thankfully, however, I now have a megaphone that I can use to trumpet Black history stories that need to be told. As a children’s book author and illustrator, I have the privilege of creating picture book biographies of these little-known historical figures.

Recently, I illustrated a book about the Father of Black History himself. *Carter Reads the Newspaper*, written by Deborah Hopkinson, highlights the

life of Dr. Carter G. Woodson and his work. In 1926, Woodson created Negro History Week (the precursor to Black History Month, which started in 1970). He was motivated to create an official celebration after a college professor suggested to him that Black people had no history. Woodson set out to change that perception.

I have also illustrated books about baseball executive Effa Manley, astronaut Ronald McNair, inventor Lonnie Johnson, and the high-flying Harlem Globetrotters. As an author, I’ve written stories about outsider artist Bill Traylor, enslaved poet George Moses Horton, and football-playing artist Ernie Barnes (to be released later this fall). My stories explore the lives of Black people in the sciences, agriculture, politics, and law, as well as those who were artists, athletes, and activists. My stories humanize a people historically misrepresented in literature and portrayed as stereotypes.

My most recent book, *William Still and His Freedom Stories: The Father of the Underground Railroad*, highlights the life of a Black abolitionist in Philadelphia who helped hundreds of freedom-seeking people escape

slavery on the Underground Railroad. In addition, he documented the stories of people like Harriet Tubman, William and Ellen Craft, Henry “Box” Brown—some of the same people that Carter G. Woodson would later write about.

People often ask me how to expand the study of Black history in the library and classroom, beyond Black History Month. It’s a question that leaves me scratching my head because the answer, in my humble opinion, is simple: Expand Black history in the library and classroom beyond Black History Month. Period. Today, there are many terrific picture book biographies on Black people to share with students. Below are some resources to help find them:

- The Brown Bookshelf is an online initiative where I am a co-contributor. Our mission is to highlight books by Black children’s book creators. Our flagship initiative is called “28 Days Later” (www.thebrownbookshelf.com/28-days-later), which we observe during Black History Month, each day highlighting a Black creator and their books.

This year, we started a new initiative called "Generations Book Club" (www.thebrownbookshelf.com/2020/06/15/generations-book-club-community-culture). Each month, we offer a themed selection of books for all ages that shows the Black experience in all its shapes and forms.

- I have also been active in the We Need Diverse Books campaign (www.diversebooks.org), whose goal is to put more books featuring diverse characters into the hands of all children. Resources and

programs can be found on the WNDB website.

- Here Wee Read: Contemporary Living for Book Loving Families (www.hereweeread.com/podcast) is a website and podcast with a focus on books featuring Black people.
- The Ezra Jack Keats Foundation (www.ezra-jack-keats.org/about-the-ejk-award) gives awards to books that reflect our diverse population, the universal experience of childhood, and the strength of family.

- The Coretta Scott King Book Awards (www.ala.org/rt/emiert/ckbookawards) are given annually to outstanding African-American authors and illustrators of books for children and young adults that demonstrate an appreciation of African-American culture and universal human values.
- Lee & Low Books (www.leeandlow.com) is the largest multicultural children's book publisher in the United States.

Don Tate is the award-winning illustrator of numerous books for children, including *Swish! The Slam-Dunking, Alley-Ooping, High-Flying Harlem Globetrotters* (Little, Brown, and Company), *Carter Reads the Newspaper* (Peachtree Publishing), *No Small Potatoes: Junius G. Groves and His Kingdom in Kansas* (Knopf), and *Whoosh! Lonnie Johnson's Super-Soaking Stream of Inventions* (Charlesbridge). He is the author and illustrator of *William Still and His Freedom Stories: The Father of the Underground Railroad* (Peachtree Publishing), *Strong As Sandow: How Eugen Sandow Became the Strongest Man on Earth* (Charlesbridge), *Poet: The Remarkable Story of George Moses Horton* (Peachtree Publishing), for which he won the Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Award, and *It Jes' Happened: When Bill Traylor Started to Draw* (Lee & Low Books), for which he won the Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Honor.

Black history is American history, and therefore all children benefit when it is included in school curricula. But, for the sake of Black children who need to see themselves and their history represented authentically in books, and for other kids who need to learn about and empathize with other people and cultures, that history needs to expand beyond the one month. Erasure is another form of dehumanization.

I am a more confident Black man knowing more about the rich history of my people and the contributions they've made to our world.

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