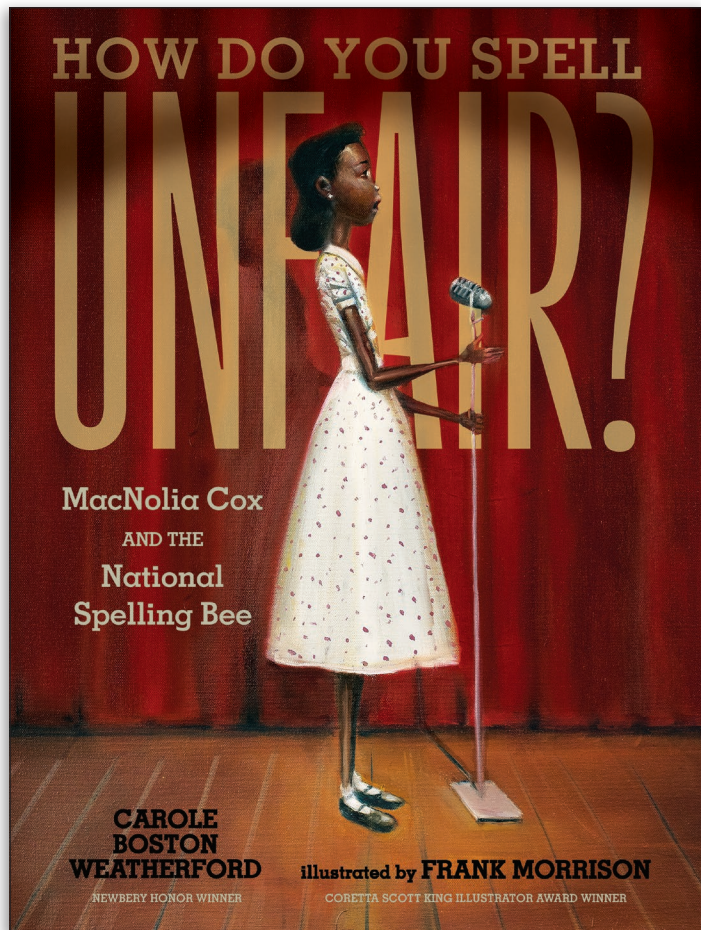


HOW DO YOU SPELL UNFAIR?

MacNolia Cox and the National Spelling Bee

CAROLE BOSTON WEATHERFORD

illustrated by FRANK MORRISON



HC: 978-1-5362-1554-0
Also available as an e-book

Common Core Connections

This guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.

MacNolia Cox was no ordinary kid.

Her idea of fun was reading the dictionary.

In 1936, eighth grader MacNolia Cox became the first African American to win the Akron, Ohio, spelling bee. And with that win, she was asked to compete at the prestigious National Spelling Bee in Washington, DC, where she and a girl from New Jersey were the first African Americans invited since its founding. She left her home state a celebrity—right up there with Joe Louis and Ohio's own Jesse Owens—with a military band and a crowd of thousands to see her off at the station. But celebration turned to chill when the train crossed the state line into Maryland, where segregation was the law of the land. Prejudice and discrimination ruled—on the train, in the hotel, and, sadly, at the spelling bee itself.

This teachers' guide prompts students to think about the ways that children accomplished great things, even when times were very different than they are now. It also encourages them to think about an area in their own lives where they persevered and how that positively impacted them. It offers discussion questions and classroom activities for teachers working with students in grades 2–5.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. After MacNolia won the Akron spelling bee, she advanced to the National Spelling Bee. At the train station, "a military band and a crowd of thousands" saw her off to Washington, DC. Why do you think it may have been important to community members to celebrate MacNolia?
2. As MacNolia is heading to Washington, DC, the author lets the reader know that "she was about to face some hard truths." What is the author trying to convey by saying this? How do the illustrations help the reader confirm their understanding of this phrase?
3. Once MacNolia and her mother arrive at the spelling bee banquet, they are told to climb the stairs and enter the ballroom through a back door. How do you think MacNolia and her mother may have felt at this time?
4. MacNolia arrives at the spelling bee and finds that she will be joined in the competition by another Black child, Elizabeth Kenney. How do you think MacNolia may have felt once she found out that she wouldn't be alone?
5. Once MacNolia advances to the final five, the judges throw her a curveball, a word she hadn't studied for: *nemesis*. This word was not on the official list. Do you think it was fair of the judges to ask MacNolia to spell this word? Why or why not?
6. As the story continues, the reader discovers that MacNolia was eliminated after misspelling the word *nemesis*. However, the author shares that becoming a finalist in the National Spelling Bee was still an achievement. What did MacNolia accomplish during the story?
7. Though MacNolia didn't win the spelling bee, she advanced to the final five and didn't give up on herself. Can you share about a time when you didn't win a competition or game but still tried your best?
8. How do MacNolia's emotions change from the beginning of her spelling bee journey to the end? How can the illustrations help you think about how her emotions may have changed throughout the story?
9. Think about the title *How Do You Spell Unfair?* Why do you think the author chose this title? What events in the story help you to confirm your thinking?
10. After reading the book and learning more about other children who participated in spelling bees, think about why the author may have decided this was an important story to tell. What do you think the author wanted you to know about MacNolia Cox?



CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Making a Change

In the epilogue, the author writes about a student from Lynchburg who wrote a letter to President John F. Kennedy asking for help to “get the Lynchburg bee open to all children.” That letter ran in newspapers across the country. Ask students to think about a rule that they would like to see changed. Have students write four to five sentences and share them with partners or in a small group. Ask them to consider why they want the rule changed and who might be able to help them change that rule. Encourage them to write a letter asking for help.



Reaching My Goals

Throughout the story, MacNolia Cox shows that she isn't the type of person to give up when things get hard or when people around her feel that she doesn't belong in the same space. Talk about what it means to persevere and allow students to co-create a list of times when they've persevered to reach a goal. Afterward, have students use sentence stems (if needed) to write about their experience.

Example: *I persevered when _____.*
Afterward, I felt _____.

After completing the writing portion, allow students to share with partners or in small groups.

Proud of Our Own

At the end of MacNolia's whirlwind trip, she “took home a seventy-five-dollar prize and was honored with a big homecoming parade.” Ask students to think about how they might want to be celebrated if they were to win a spelling bee or another competition. Then have students draw pictures to represent their ideal celebration. Afterward, allow students to write about why they would celebrate that way.

Example: *If I won a competition, I would _____.*

Example: *I would celebrate this way because _____.*

Making an Impact

MacNolia Cox was thirteen years old when she competed in the National Spelling Bee. Participating in the competition helped open the door for other children to also be able to compete in later years. Ask students to think about other children they know of who helped make a positive change in their community. Allow students time to research children who noticed a problem and made an effort to change their community. After researching, provide students time to create a display (poster, chart, sign, etc.) to share information about the person they learned about. Encourage them to write a brief explanation about why they selected the person.

Example: *I chose to learn about _____ because _____.*

Example: _____ impacted their community by _____.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Motivation Through Music

After winning the Akron spelling bee, MacNolia has the opportunity to meet a popular jazz musician and composer of her time, Fats Waller. Listen to Fats Waller's song "All God's Chillun Got Wings" and then read the lyrics. The Impressions was a group that was popular later in MacNolia's life. Listen to their song "Keep on Pushing" and then read the lyrics. Discuss how the lyrics of one or both songs amplify the story's message.



Athletes as Activists

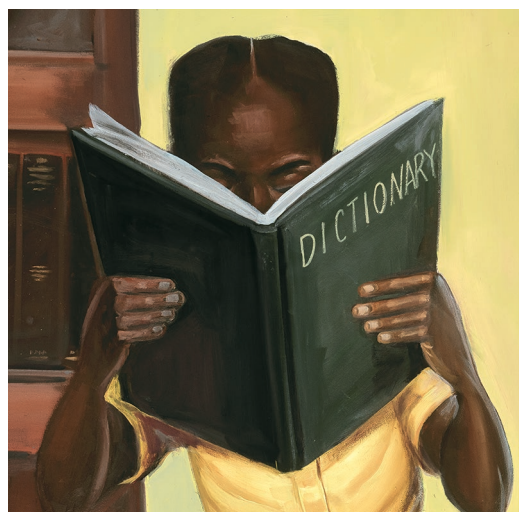
MacNolia's accomplishment in the spelling bee was mentioned often in Akron after she won. Her name came up in conversation alongside the boxing champion Joe Louis and the track star Jesse Owens. In groups, allow students to choose which athlete to research. After researching, each group can share information with a group that selected the other athlete. As a class, complete a Venn diagram comparing the two figures to determine similarities and differences. Consider their accomplishments and what types of adversity they had to overcome when creating the Venn diagram. Students can then complete a Venn diagram comparing MacNolia to these two athletes.

Protest Signs of Your Own

MacNolia and her mother traveled by train to DC. Once their train reached Maryland, because of segregation laws, they had to move to a car just for Black passengers. Once they arrived, they weren't allowed to stay in the hotel designated for spelling bee participants. That hotel was for white customers only. Throughout history, people have protested against laws they considered unfair or unjust. As a class, using the Library of Congress online collection, look at and discuss signs that enforced discrimination during MacNolia's time. Afterward, allow students to create protest signs to respond to that discrimination.

Cloud of Emotions

The author often uses hyphenated words spelled out letter by letter to emphasize how MacNolia is feeling throughout the book. As a class, discuss other words that could be used to describe her emotions over the course of her journey. Co-create a list of the words contributed by everyone. Allow students to use these words to create a word cloud of MacNolia's feelings.

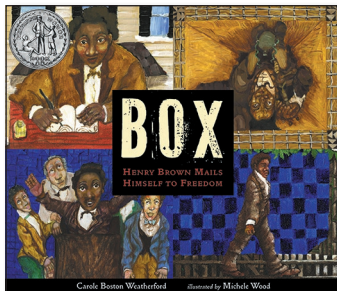




About Carole Boston Weatherford

Carole Boston Weatherford, a *New York Times* best-selling author and poet, was named the 2019 *Washington Post*–Children’s Book Guild Nonfiction Award winner. Her numerous books for children include the Coretta Scott King Author Award winner *Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre*, illustrated by Floyd Cooper; the Caldecott Honor Books *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom*, illustrated by Kadir Nelson, and *Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer, Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement*, illustrated by Ekua Holmes, which was also a Robert F. Sibert Honor Book; the critically acclaimed *Schomburg: The Man Who Built a Library*, illustrated by Eric Velasquez; and the Newbery Honor Book *BOX: Henry Brown Mails Himself to Freedom*, illustrated by Michele Wood. Carole Boston Weatherford lives in North Carolina.

ALSO BY CAROLE BOSTON WEATHERFORD

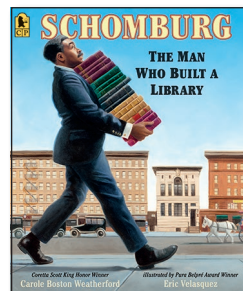


BOX: Henry Brown Mails Himself to Freedom

HC: 978-0-7636-9156-1

PB: 978-1-5362-2775-8

Also available as an e-book

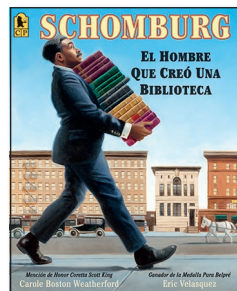


Schomburg: The Man Who Built a Library

HC: 978-0-7636-8046-6

PB: 978-1-5362-0897-9

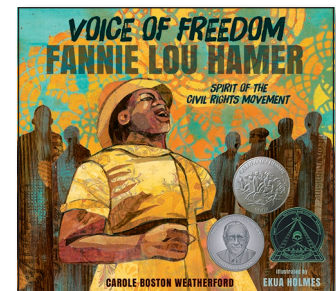
Also available as an e-book



Schomburg: El hombre que creó una biblioteca

PB: 978-1-5362-0898-6

Also available as an e-book



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

HC: 978-0-7636-6531-9

PB: 978-1-5362-0325-7

Also available as an e-book



About Frank Morrison

Frank Morrison has won numerous awards for his picture book illustration, including the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award and the John Steptoe New Talent Illustrator Award. He previously collaborated with Carole Boston Weatherford on *R-E-S-P-E-C-T: Aretha Franklin, the Queen of Soul*; *Standing in the Need of Prayer: A Modern Retelling of the Classic Spiritual*; *How Sweet the Sound: The Story of Amazing Grace*; and *The Roots of Rap: 16 Bars on the 4 Pillars of Hip-Hop*. Frank Morrison lives outside Atlanta.

This guide was prepared by Antonia Adams, a Texas educator from the Houston area. She is an active member of the National Council of Teachers of English.