

Harlem's Little Blackbird: A Timeless Story about a Forgotten Entertainer

Florence Mills could have been in Ziegfeld's Follies – but she chose Black theater instead

Lisa Loving
The Skanner News

Renee Watson is a native New Yorker who has taught art, poetry, creative writing and theater to kids from pre-school on up. She also uses drama and writing as therapy tools for youth and adult clients. Her stunning new children's picture book, "Harlem's Little Blackbird: The Story of Florence Mills," shares the true-life tale of a singer during the 1920s artistic and cultural movement in New York.

While many people have heard of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Count Basie and Duke Ellington, Florence Mills' legacy has been lost to history – because, incredibly, there is no known recording of her voice. Yet the artist was so loved in her day that other artists wrote music and theater in her honor.

In this book, Mills gracefully sketches Mills' life – as a daughter of former slaves whose talent led her to the Broadway stage but whose compassion for her own community led her to turn down a spot on the Ziegfeld Follies to focus on all-Black theater shows instead.

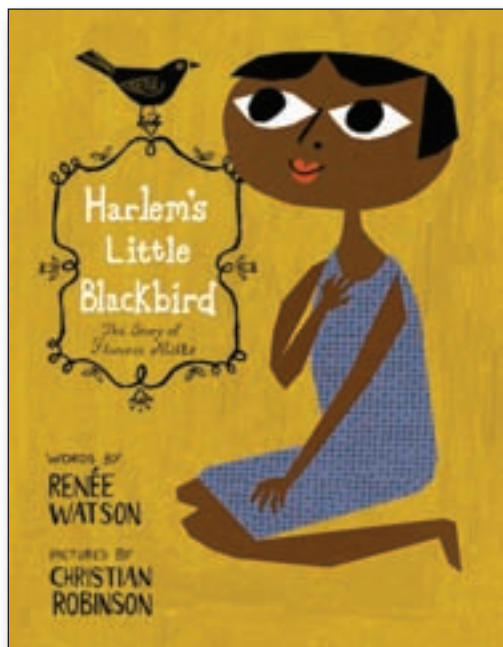
All this — wrapped in exquisite original art by Christian Robinson using both painting and collage – for elementary school readers. This is a truly incredible book that everyone should pick up and read, no matter your age or background.

Watson's previous books are the picture book, "A Place Where Hurricanes Happen," and her gripping young adult novel, "What Momma Left Me."

The Skanner News conducted an email interview with Watson about her writing, her story, and why reading is so important.

The Skanner News: What made you decide to write this book?

Renee Watson: I wanted to write a series of books that honored the lives of women of color who accomplished amazing things, but we may not know much about. When I learned Florence's story, I knew I had to tell it. This little girl, born to former slaves, was already dancing and singing by the time she was six-years-old. She was very young



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—Renee Watson

when she was invited to sing at an all-white theater and was told that her black guests could not come in, so she refused to sing. I was moved by the boldness and passion she had at such a young age and I thought young people should know about this remarkable little girl who grew up to be an internationally acclaimed performer.

While the book celebrates her professional career, for me, it is about using your voice to make change—big or small. It is about holding on to your dream and believing that no matter where you come from, you can go anywhere, do anything.

TSN: Who is your audience?

RW: My primary audience for this book is children ages 7 and up. My hope is that people of all ages enjoy the story and find something that resonates with them.

TSN: One of my favorite things about this gorgeous book as the author's note at the end about how Florence's voice was never recorded. How did you first hear of this remarkable woman and how did you research this story?

RW: I was introduced to Florence's story by my editor, Suzy Capozzi. I worked with Suzy on my first picture book, *A Place Where Hurricanes Happen*, and when I

pitched my idea to her about writing a series honoring unsung heroes, she told me she had the perfect person in mind.

I did most of my research at The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The Schomburg is a treasure in Harlem that has a research library and a wealth of information on people of African descent worldwide. There, I was able to read original newspapers that featured stories on Florence, and look through a collection of her personal artifacts, including the playbills from her performances, letters that she wrote, and her touring schedules. I also read the book, *Harlem Jazz Queen* by Bill Egan. Egan's book is what made me fall in love with Florence.

TSN: One of the remarkable things about this book is that the style of it reminds me of classics from when I was a kid,



Renee Watson, author

like *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats and that one story about the little house in New York that refused to move for office buildings to be built around it and at the end the house is moved back out to the country. Who inspires you in writing? And did anyone inspire you to write *Harlem's Little Blackbird*?

RW: I love *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats, too!

In terms of writing, most of my inspiration comes from poetry. Poetry is all about using the fewest words to convey big emotion. It's about rhythm and choosing the right words to tell a story. I read a lot of poetry when I'm writing picture books. It reminds me that less is more.

When writing *Harlem's Little Blackbird*, I looked at several picture book biographies to see how other writers wrote about legendary performers. Two of the books I went back to over and over again were *When Marian Sang* by Pam Muñoz Ryan and *Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra* by Andrea and Brian Pinkney.

TSN: How did you hook up with Christian Robinson?

RW: I was introduced to Christian by Random House. From the moment I saw his portfolio, I fell in love with his style and was very excited that we'd be collaborating on this project. Christian lives in California and I live in New York, so we haven't met face to face. We've spoken only

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