



I Lay My Stitches Down: Poems of American Slavery

Cynthia Grady , Michele Wood (Illustrator)

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This rich and intricate collection of poems chronicles the various experiences of American slaves. Drawn together through imagery drawn from quilting and fiber arts, each poem is spoken from a different perspective: a house slave, a mother losing her daughter to the auction block, a blacksmith, a slave fleeing on the Underground Railroad.

This moving and eloquent set of poems, brought to life by vivid and colorful artwork from Michele Wood, offers a timeless witness to the hardship endured by America's slaves. Each poem is supplemented by a historical note.

I Lay My Stitches Down: Poems of American Slavery Details

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From Reader Review *I Lay My Stitches Down: Poems of American Slavery* for online ebook

Jill says

This patchwork quilt of poems by Cynthia Grady, who is a poet, a librarian, and a quilter, includes fourteen poems that describe the lives of enslaved people in America. Each poem is named for a traditional quilt pattern, which also echoes the theme and style of the poem.

For example, this is the poem “Log Cabin.”

"The finds of archaeologists beneath
dilapidated cabins down the hill:
some chicken bones, the skins and skulls of coons
and squirrels – hard remains of suppers stalked
by moonlight, faith, starvation. Caches, too,
of divination: sea shells, broken beads,
and bundled roots suggest how slaves survived
a knotted life of cornmeal, cruelty, death.
The dig won't yield the stolen, lost, withheld:
shoes, safety, drums, dignity, daughters, sons."

Other poems include “Anvil” about a blacksmith and “Rail Fence” about slaves who were horse trainers or jockeys. “Wagon Wheel” describes a girl separated from her family, and “Tree of Life” tells of a slave tied to a tree and under the lash. The form of the poems is unrhymed but tightly metered lines of ten syllables apiece, in order to mimic the square shape of a quilt block.

Not all poems are about fear and suffering (although most are); some reflect moments of joy or spirituality.

A vibrant acrylic painting by award winner Michele Wood illustrates each poem. The pictures incorporate the quilt pattern used in the title of the poem.

Nicole Santiago says

This poetic masterpiece, inspired by quilting customs kept alive by African slaves, pieces together the plight and daily lives of those enslaved. Quilts have three layers and are diverse in their patterns, so Grady incorporates three references into each of the fourteen free-verse poems: a biblical or spiritual reference, a musical reference, and a sewing or fiber arts reference. The poems' parallel structures and patterns are mirrors of structures and patterns involved in quilting.

Michele Wood, a Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award winner, used acrylics on canvas for the full-page paintings. They are vibrantly colored, intricately detailed with traditional quilt patterns, and feature the quilt pattern of the partnering poem; the illustrations tell their own stories.

The poetry, prose, and paintings encourage empathy and critical thought about the enslavement of African

Americans. The author includes an Author's Note, Illustrator's Note, and bibliography to show the level of research and authenticity that makes this piece so highly rated.

Students in grades four through eight would craft new insights on the experience of slavery after the text is read aloud and discussed in small groups, with scaffolding to ensure the topic is handled with the care it deserves.

Ann says

I was looking forward to reading this book, and it didn't disappoint. Poems shaped like blocks on a quilt describe the brutality of African American slavery and the spirit and artistry of the people enslaved. In the author's note, Grady states that she is aware of the argument among historians about the use of quilts as signs to escape to freedom, but she still embraces this means ("a common thread") of expression. Michelle Wood's illustrations are unique and stirring.

Sharon Lawler says

I could not improve on the summary on the inside flap, so I quote: "...spiritual, musical, and quilting references...to express the pain, sorrow, and weariness as well as the joy and hope sustained by those living in slavery in America." Michele Wood's provides paintings which depict both African and American textile patterns. Author's and Illustrator's notes. Bibliography.

Liz says

Thoughtful collection of poems about various experiences and perspectives of American slaves. Each poem centers around a quilt. Cultural and historical information is shared about each poem. Acrylic illustrations fit well, and the poems are powerful and invite reflection. Great supplement to a unit on slavery or America's past.

Janet says

I would give this one a ten star rating. Poetry is not my favorite choice of literature. The total concept of this book, however fascinated me. This is Cynthia Grady's first book and she has combined her love of quilting and poetry to depict slavery. In her two paragraph intro the reader learns these facts as well as that the poems are unrhymed verse of ten lines with three types of references in each: a biblical or spiritual one, a musical one, and a sewing or fiber arts one. This intro had me reading to find the references and they were well done and used in accurate ways depicting various aspects of slavery. Also included on each page in much smaller print is a factual paragraph about the various aspect of slavery in the poem.

What can I say although the subject matter is sad, the delivery of the material was interesting and all poets would do well to teach us more about their literary form. Its a great book combining various disparate elements into one wonderful whole learning experience.

Ellie says

Beautiful. The illustrations are amazing and the thought and care put into each of these poems is masterful. Grady pairs each of her poems with information and facts behind every bit of the poem, so kids actually have a chance at understanding some of the slightly abstract/little-known history and ideas in her poetry. Maybe not the best for an introduction to slavery, but a perfect complementary work for any teacher's unit on slavery. Fantastic.

Jeanne Williams says

Each two-page spread features a poem about slavery, a note about the historical details that support the form, and a detailed acrylic painting of the scene/event the poem describes. The poems are unrhymed verse, "ten lines of ten syllables, to mimic the square shape of a quilt block. Each includes three references to mimic the layers of a quilt--"a biblical or spiritual reference, a musical reference, and a sewing or fiber arts reference." A good read aloud for younger children, but I think of this book in terms of teaching older students (middle and high school) about the forms of poetry. Used with *A Wreath for Emmitt Till*, this would be an effective pairing to teach how the forms of poetry can be used to tell powerful truths about the human condition.

Sara says

I Lay My Stitches Down is a collection of poems written by Cynthia Grady. All of the poems share a common topic, American Slavery. In the introduction, Grady points out the similarities between quilt making and poetry. In poetry, sound and structure create patterns. In quilt making, color and shape form patterns. Grady says, "Each poem in this collection is named for a traditional quilt block and reflects a metaphorical patchwork of circumstances encountered by enslaved people in America." There are many other common threads between quilting, poetry, and slavery that Grady includes in this collection.

This book would be appropriate for a poetry unit in the fifth grade. Students could discuss the common themes among the poems, as well as study how the speaker reflects upon American slavery. Students could analyze the structure and craft of the book and make sense of the connections between slavery, quilt making, and poetry. Lastly, students could make sense of the spiritual, musical, and sewing references in each poem. Because of the number of poems within the book, a teacher could easily have students work in pairs to study one poem on a deeper level and then explain what they learned to the whole class.

This is a WOW book for me because of the interesting content, connections, and illustrations. I thoroughly enjoyed making sense of the poems, finding the references, and analyzing the illustrations.

Danielle says

I Lay My Stitches Down is a book full of poems and historical notes about African American slaves. Each

poem is written from a different persons perspective. This helps the reader envision several aspects of slavery. This book can be paired with other books about African American History. It can also be used to teach different perspectives.

Ellen Ramsey says

The poems and the illustrations are a kaleidoscope of words and music and color. I particularly like the last poem. Here are a few lines—

"I lay my stitches down and troubles fall
away. Before too long, I'm breathing with
the rhythm of my quilting—listening
with every fiber of my soul."

Becky says

This is a beautiful book. Each two page spread has poem that discusses the experience of slavery. Below the poem is an historical note telling about how the things in the poem connect to slavery. The facing page is a full page painting that connects with the poem.

I was intrigued when I found out that this is a part of the short list in the Children's Choice Book Awards in the 5th and 6th grade division. Although not a final winner, it shows the power of this book that 10-12 year olds would consider it one of the best books published for their age group in 2012. (The Children's Choice Book Awards are cosponsored by the Children's Book Council and the International Reading Association, and the book lists can be found at <http://www.reading.org/resources/book...>)

Barbara says

The cover of this book and its acrylic illustrations containing quilt patterns and images that seem perfectly suited for each poem drew me in from the first time I glimpsed it. Opening the book and reading and then rereading the 14 poems contained within only left me further intrigued. The poet names each of her unrhymed poems after a traditional quilt pattern such as log cabin, wagon wheel or kaleidoscope. According to the note at the front of the book, she chooses to write ten lines of ten syllables in order to emulate the shape of a quilt square. Beneath each poem there are references to spiritual, musical, and sewing elements, each of which adds a layer to the poem, just as quilts are made with layers. There are perspectives on slavery here that have received little notice; for instance, that of a harried house slave who knows that her mistake may mean a move to field work in "Broken Dishes," and those of children intent on learning to read and write while celebrating a teacher in "Schoolhouse" who teaches "her lessons loud and clear--her voice, a prayer/ with wings. It gives us hope: it sings us home" (unpaged). Stunning images and stunning words make this a memorable poetry collection for the classroom.

Jordan McBride says

Cynthia's poetry about American Slavery was not only very well written, but Michele's illustrations were incorporated so beautifully into the book that it was impossible to separate one from the other. Although it looks like a picture book on the outside, the book is perfectly suited for the middle grades or higher. At the bottom of each poem is a small section of explanations about things quilting, slavery, or spiritually related that are expressed in that individual poem. For someone that knows NOTHING about quilting, I found this to be helpful. This book would be a wonderful tool for Black History Month or for a history lesson on slavery in America.

Nina says

This patchwork quilt of poems uses beautiful illustrations to chronicle the lives of slaves from different perspectives. Each of the 14 poems is named after a quilt pattern and is written in 10 lines of 10 syllables each to mimic a quilt square. The language is rich and strong, complemented beautifully by vivid illustrations. Each poem is also accompanied by nonfiction text. This picturebook is a great introduction to slavery because it shows a variety of experiences, from a mother losing her child, to a blacksmith, to a runaway slave heading north on the Underground Railroad.
