



The Caucus Race

News, Announcements and Paper Calls

Children's Literature Association Announces 2019 Phoenix Award Winners



Louise Erdrich, author of *The Birchbark House* (Hyperion, 1999), is **the winner of the 2019 Phoenix Award**, given to the author of a book for children published originally in English that did not win a major award at the time of its publication twenty years earlier.

The award was announced at the annual conference of the Children's Literature Association (ChLA), an organization encouraging high standards of criticism, scholarship, research, and teaching in children's literature. The Phoenix Award is named after the fabled bird that rose from its ashes with renewed life and beauty. Phoenix books also rise from the ashes of neglect and obscurity and once again touch the imaginations and enrich the lives of those who read them.

Taking young Omakayas through one year of shifting seasons, Louise Erdrich's beautifully written *The Birchbark House* offers memorable characters; rich, vivid settings and experiences; and authentic historical detail. In making its selection, the Phoenix Award Committee noted how the rhythm of Omakayas's daily life—the chores she hates, her relationships with her siblings, her friendship with Andeg the crow—provides insight into the Ojibwa experience in the mid-nineteenth century and praised the ways in which Erdrich populates her novel with complex, larger-than-life figures like Old Tallow, a powerful and isolated old woman who plays an important role in Omakayas's life. Erdrich's illustrations heighten the sense of place and reinforce the book's gentle humor. By offering young readers an opportunity to explore how Native Americans viewed the white man's tyranny, the novel serves as a counterpoint to prevailing narratives of the "frontier." Combining realism and mysticism to create a layered but cohesive story, *The Birchbark House* captures the importance of storytelling as a means to preserve cultural memory.

The Honor Book for the 2019 Phoenix Award is Connie Porter's *Imani All Mine* (Houghton Mifflin/Mariner, 1999). The emotional intensity of *Imani All Mine* comes from the pitch-perfect voice of teen mother Tasha from inner-city Buffalo. This fifteen-year-old's African-American vernacular never flags in its raw power to shock and compel belief. Her baby girl Imani, or faith, becomes the abiding source of Tasha's will to surmount rape, racism, and drug-dealing violence. Tasha's love for her daughter and her anguished attempts to be a good mother, despite her youth and ignorance, endure without support from her own single mother and many teachers. Her terror that she might have harmed Imani by shaking her in a moment of frustration is as palpable as her horror of contact with the boy who preyed upon her. The committee praised this book for its ability to be heart-rending and hilarious, hurtful and healing in its surprising turns of phrase and truthfulness to Tasha's lived experience. Connie Porter's rendering of sexuality, maternity and spirituality reveals Tasha's inimitable being with daring originality.

Black Cat (Scholastic, 1999), written and illustrated by Christopher Myers, is **the winner of the 2019 Phoenix Picture Book Award**. The honor recognizes a picture book published twenty years ago, but which did not win any major awards at that time. This award is innovative in that it recognizes not only the illustrator, but also the author (if they happen to be two separate people). Books are considered for the quality of their illustrations as well as for the ways in which the pictures and text work together to tell a fictional or non-fictional story.



A rough, gritty beauty permeates Christopher Myers's celebration of the city and the cat that confidently roams its streets. Nothing in *Black Cat* fits seamlessly together—not the mixture of photographs, collage, ink, and gouache that create the cityscapes, nor the combination of jarring sounds and images interspersed with a rhythmic refrain in the description of the cat's adventures. Nevertheless, as the award committee noted in its selection, this lack of complete harmony conveys a raw beauty and deep feelings, particularly through the independence of both the cat and the city. The words and photographs highlight both the beauties and the haunting tensions of the urban space. The story operates on a metaphoric as well as a literal level, enabling the book to be innovative and edgy, symbolic and provocative. Its connotations linger in the mind long after the story is over.



The Honor Book for the 2019 Phoenix Picture Book Award is *Tree of Hope* (Philomel, 1999), written by Amy Littlesugar and illustrated by Floyd Cooper. Littlesugar's narrative voice and Cooper's oil-wash paintings unite to deliver a powerful story of hard-won dreams, family and community. The story's comparisons between "the old days, the golden days" of the Harlem Renaissance and the story's present day in 1930s Harlem create compelling scenes about the effects of the Great Depression on the community and impact of Orson Welles's *Macbeth*, which had an all-black cast. The selection committee remarked that the book shines brightest when conveying the interactions between protagonist Florrie's family, in both word and image. Told from young Florrie's point of view, the story is really about her father, who is able to renew his acting dreams when the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem opens back up. Based on true events, *Tree of Hope* moves between scenes of urban poverty and colorful theatre stages to tell a new story of African-American vitality, hope and artistry in the midst of a bleak chapter in American history.

The Phoenix Picture Book Awards will be presented at the 2019 Children's Literature Association Conference, to be hosted by Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) and Indiana University East, June 13–16, 2019, in Indianapolis. More information about the Children's Literature Association, and a complete list of Phoenix Award winners, can be found on the Association's web site: <http://www.childlitassn.org>.
