Black Hands, White Sails: The Story of African-American Whalers Short Guide

Black Hands, White Sails: The Story of African-American Whalers by Patricia C. McKissack and Fredrick L. McKissack

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Overview

Scholastic Press published the McKissacks' Black Hands, White Sails in 1999. This remarkable but obscure story focuses on blacks in the East Coast whaling industry from the 1400s to the early 1900s. Despite the dangers of going to sea and hunting whales, escaped slaves sought freedom by working on ships that supplied up to 80 percent of the oil used by Americans. Free black seamen sought career opportunities as first mates, captains, or owners.

Black Hands, White Sails details complete voyages of whaling ships from registering at the docks, to hunting the whale, to returning home. The McKissacks include a collection of photographs and drawings of seamen and towns, provide renderings of political acts and crew lists, and share distinguishing songs of the voyagers. This book serves as an addition to a history or multicultural curriculum, as well as a great resource for research projects.



About the Author

Patricia L'Ann Carwell was born on August 9, 1944 in Smyrna, Tennessee, to Robert and Erma Carwell, both civil servants.

At the age of three, Patricia moved to St.

Louis, Missouri, with her parents. When they divorced, Patricia stayed in St. Louis with her paternal grandparents; her mother and siblings returned to Tennessee. After spending these formative years with her father's parents, Patricia returned to her mother and siblings.

Patricia loved writing as a young child.

She enjoyed taking control of the words and creating her own stories. Her grandfather, teachers, parents and friends influenced her creativity. She fondly remembers hanging a poem she wrote on her third grade bulletin board.

Patricia received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1964 from Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State University, now Tennessee State University. She married Fredrick L. McKissack on December 12, 1964. They raised three children: Fredrick L., Jr., and twins Robert and John.

Patricia taught junior high school English in Kirkwood, Missouri, from 1968 to 1975. In 1975, she worked as a part-time instructor in English at Forest Park College in St. Louis, Missouri. Patricia earned a Masters of Arts degree from Webster University in 1975. From 1976 to 1981, she worked as a children's book editor at Concordia Publishing House. She became an instructor at the University of Missouri in St. Louis in 1978 and a co-owner of AllWriting Services. In 1984, she joined the Institute of Children's Literature. Patricia is an educational consultant.

Patricia and Fredrick began collaborating in 1982 when they both faced turning points in their careers. When Fredrick asked her, "If you could do anything you want to do in this whole wide world for the rest of your life, what would you do?" Patricia responded, "Write books." Her husband said he'd like to join her. With their children, they began making that dream a reality. They published their first book in 1984.

It is hard to separate the lives of Patricia and Fredrick. As childhood friends and sweethearts, they share their experiences of growing up and write as if they were one person.

As children maturing in the 1960s, the McKissacks experienced a time of violent sit-ins, protests, and the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, Jr., among others. These events shaped their lives. Much of their optimism comes from the Kennedy era when people sought to end segregation and discrimination. For Patricia,



the harsh events tempered her positive attitude and combined to produce the variety and depth she generates in her books.

Over 100 books and nearly twenty years later, the McKissacks keep writing. Most of the books they write are biographies and nonfiction works about the history of African Americans. Fredrick likes researching the books, and Patricia puts the words to paper.

As well as collaborations with Fredrick, Patricia writes books using her own name.

Writing historical fiction and biographies for children, she focuses on religious as well as African-American themes. Her love of writing is partly inspired by her work as an English instructor for junior high and college students.

The author is a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI). Patricia encourages would-be writers, particularly African Americans, to earn a living in writing. "It's hard work, but you can make a living. And we need more black voices; we need different points of view."

Patricia enjoys traveling the world, entertaining, and touring old houses. She lives in Chesterfield, Missouri, with Fredrick.

Fredrick Lemuel McKissack was born to Lewis Winter, an architect, and Bessye (Fizer) McKissack, on August 12, 1939 in Nashville, Tennessee.

Fredrick served in the U.S. Marine Corps from 1957 to 1960. He returned to Tennessee and graduated with a bachelor of science degree from Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State University in 1964. He married his childhood sweetheart and friend Patricia L'Ann Carwell on December 12, 1964. They raised three children: Fredrick Lemuel, Jr., and twins Robert and John.

Fredrick worked as a civil engineer for city and federal governments from 1964 to 1974. He owned a general contracting company in St. Louis, Missouri, from 1974 to 1982. He left that business to pursue writing full-time. He co-owns All-Writing Services with Patricia.

The author is a member of the National Writers Guild and the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI).

Fredrick puts his efforts towards young readers because he believes in the strength of education for young students.

Fredrick and Patricia work from home.

They start work between 9:00 and 9:30 A.M., and they work until they have finished what they planned to do that day. Fred gets the facts for their latest project. Patricia puts the stories on the computer and then runs off a hard copy. Fredrick checks the facts and adds his changes. Patricia puts the changes into the computer, editing as she goes along. They do this until the manuscript satisfies both of them.



In describing the tumultuous 1960s civil rights movement, Fredrick says that life actually changed. America moved from a segregated society towards a nation that tried to live up to its constitutional guarantees.... One of the reasons we write for children is to introduce them to African and African[-]American history and historical figures and to get them to internalize the information not just academically, but also emotionally. We want them to feel the tremendous amount of hurt and sadness that racism and discrimination cause all people, regardless of race.

Black Hands, White Sails won the Coretta Scott King Award. Patricia and Fredrick came up with the idea for this book while watching the History Channel about ships.

They realized that whalers were frequently men of color, such as African Americans, Cape Verde Islanders, West Indians, and South Sea Islanders.

The McKissacks journeyed to Nantucket, New Bedford, Martha's Vineyard, Mystic Seaport, Sag Harbor, Boston, and Plymouth to gather firsthand information about the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century whaling industry. They examined old captain's logs, sea records, and museum artifacts that further brought them into the story. They felt American history lacked this story, so they decided to write Black Hands, White Sails.

Fredrick has authored over one hundred books, primarily in collaboration with Patricia. Their topics include the history of African Americans and racial issues in labor relations, sports, politics, science, and the arts. Some of Fredrick's books have been published in Spanish.

When Fredrick is not writing, he likes to tend to the garden with Patricia at their home in Chesterfield, Missouri.



Setting

The McKissacks describe the role African Americans played in the East Coast whaling industry. The book starts with an overview of whaling, informing readers that whale oil burned longer and cleaner than other fuels. The demand for this product skyrocketed two centuries ago, creating big business. Supporting businesses emerged: shipbuilders, cooper smiths, sail makers, caulkers, and suppliers. These businesses sprung up at ocean ports that developed into robust whaling centers: places like Nantucket, New Bedford, New London, Mystic, Sag Harbor, Providence, and Cold Spring Harbor became major whaling centers. The authors present the history of whaling out of two major ports: Nantucket, a small island near Cape Cod, and New Bedford.

These ports played a vital role in the abolitionist movements and most keenly illustrated the importance of African Americans in this segment of history. The authors chose this setting for telling readers about the hardships and triumphs that African Americans experienced.

Whaling began on American shores as early as the 1600s. As the industry progressed, ships replaced shore whaling, and the long, dangerous sea journeys began.

Journeys lasted three to four years. Sailors often died from disease, drowning, murder, or a whale attack. The ship's sleeping quarters, or "forecastles," stunk from tobacco, salt water, sweaty clothes, exotic pets, and whale blubber. After a few weeks into the journey, fresh food became nonexistent. The death rate for this career came second only to mining. Despite the demands of the grueling work, the isolation from family and community, and the sea's dangers, runaway slaves eagerly sought these voyages so they could remain free and create better lives. The McKissacks, known for their efforts to enlighten others about the pain and sadness that racism and discrimination cause all people, make the case that African Americans saw this opportunity as less dehumanizing than slavery.

The whaling industry remained at the forefront of the era's political movements, much as energy companies do today. For example, two whaling ships, New Bedford's Dartmouth and Nantucket's Beaver, played a significant role in the Boston Tea Party. As these whaling ships arrived in Boston with their loads of East India Company tea, rebels disguised as Native Americans dumped the tea into the water in protest of the company's monopoly on prices. This dramatic occasion became one of the events that sparked the Revolutionary War of 1776.

The Revolutionary War devastated the American whaling industry. British fleets seized whaling ships, captured whalers, and looted homes. Hundreds of seaman fought, died, and suffered imprisonment.

Yet, the industry survived because people wanted whale oil as an energy source.



The authors provide excerpts from personal journals as well as historical documents, including the unpublished "Whalemen's Commandments." These references supply poignant details about how whalers shared wisdom and laments through recorded sayings and songs. Anecdotes add interest to the abundant data. For example, in 1852 a young woman hid her gender to become a whaling crewmember. In search of a lover, she posed as a boy and became one of the best hands on the ship. Only after suffering from a fever did the crew discover her gender. This is one instance of how the authors explore the impact of women's roles in the whaling industry.

Insights into America's diversity materialize as the authors give an overview of each culture: Quakers, Native Americans, Pilgrims, and African Americans. They show the inherent complexity of diversity, as well as the struggle for equality and fairness.

The key references in the book include: a table of contents, an acknowledgment of people and places; an appendix describing the types of whales; a chronology of important dates; a bibliography of books, journals, pamphlets, and videos; and an index.



Social Sensitivity

The authors show compassion for the African Americans dealing with persecution and racial inequity. They reveal the honest attitudes of whalers, townsfolk, and families as they deal with the audacities of racial inequity and the harshness of whaling adventures. These insights, new to many readers, help young adults understand the limitations and hurts inherent in racial inequity. It helps readers understand the difficult choices their ancestors made in providing for themselves and their families.

The McKissacks aid young adults in their search for the truth. They create a chronology of historical events, as well as additional resources on whalers, ships, African Americans, Native Americans, and the abolitionist movement. Laying out the historical facts validates the journeys of African Americans, Native Americans, Quakers, women, and whalers. Perhaps a teenager will feel appreciation and gratitude for the choices they have today, choices that do not seem as severe as the ones their ancestors had to make.

The McKissacks show empathy by communicating an honest story about a series of events that affected thousands of people and many cultures. They pass on the concepts of perseverance and integrity by providing biographies of several African Americans and how they worked to better their lives and overcome racial inequity. They show the courage of a few whites as they pushed the boundaries of the time to abolish slavery.



Literary Qualities

The McKissacks employ a plain writing style. This method works effectively for relaying the complex detail necessary to provide readers with the history of whaling and whalers.

They describe the history in chronological order, depicting the political changes of the period and the desperate measures African Americans took in overcoming racial inequity. This book gives great insight into the complexity of whaling, racial inequality, and the means whalers found to survive from 1400 to 1900 AD. It facilitates young adults' understanding of this influential time in history.



Themes and Characters

The McKissacks employ the third-person point of view in depicting the lives of whalers and their families. They also provide firstperson accounts as appropriate. Their descriptive narratives share the lives of African-American whalers whose contribution to our country's past is unfamiliar to the public. Universal themes of racial inequity and persecution, isolation, justice, and survival arise as readers experience this era in history.

The McKissacks appropriately titled the book Black Hands, White Sails. Readers may not realize that African Americans frequently operated whaling ships in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The McKissacks introduce the book with an overview of whaling and historical events that establishes its credibility. They mention the findings of several ships that substantiate the importance of whaling to the economy. As early as 1620, Pilgrims recorded that whales appeared in the coastal waters off Massachusetts, making the shore a place of profitable fishing. The McKissacks describe how the Pilgrims learned whaling techniques from the Native Americans, including the importance of harpooning and whaling skills. They describe the "tried out" process, showing how the people removed and used the whale's parts.

The authors illustrate how the Society of Friends (Quakers) became associates of African Americans and ultimately became key players in their fight for freedom. For example, the McKissacks make the case that Quakers understood persecution and racial inequity. Since Quakers formed in 1647, the government punished them for their extreme beliefs. Quakers believed that they should live by a strict code of conduct in which they valued honesty, thrift, and hard work. They shunned fighting, gambling, music, drama, art, dancing, and card playing. They got their name because many of them shook in fear or "quaked" at the "word of the Lord." Quakers also opposed slavery. These beliefs, and their opportunist business approach, made them key allies in hiring African Americans for whaling journeys.

In the early 1700s, whale exploration went to sea. This mandated redesigning ships to allow the whale to be "tried out" while at sea. Journeys were long periods of isolation, lasting frequently from three to four years. The chance of freedom and future opportunities created such a desire in African Americans that they left their loved ones to attempt these dangerous journeys.

The horrid living conditions and dangers of death shaped the characters of the sailors.

The demands of this occupation on the average twenty-two-year-old sailor created a language so colorful that we often use the terms today: "on an even keel," "high and dry," and "over a barrel." Sailors survived emotionally by keeping personal journals and singing whaling shanties (songs). Sailors who could not weather the rough seas and isolation abandoned ship at the first port.



The McKissacks describe the racial inequity that Native Americans and African Americans faced and how they coped with it. For example, whaling logs show that African Americans received lower lays (pay) than whites with the same qualifications.

Since sailors received their money at the voyage's end, owners intentionally mistreated African Americans to encourage them to leave the ship and forfeit their lay.

The African Americans that survived the journeys or became ship owners commanded respect and often served as powerful leaders in their communities.

The McKissacks show the struggle of a nation re-evaluating slavery. They mention key whalers and how they made decisions to free slaves, sometimes with dire consequences. They show how slaves responded to the persecution and how the laws of the time began to slowly chip away at slavery.

For example, before the American Revolution, a Nantucket seaman, William Swain, freed a slave, his wife, and their youngest son. The other children, as customary, remained slaves. When one of the slave sons, Prince Boston, completed a whaling journey, the lay should have gone to Swain.

Instead, the whaler owner ordered the ship's captain to pay Boston. Furious, Swain took the matter to court, and lost. As a direct result of this legal decision, Nantucket abolished slavery.

The authors devote a chapter to the "Black Whalemen of Nantucket," including key figures like "Black Jack," Frederick Douglass, and Captain Paul Cuffe. These men played a prominent role in political movements. For example, slaves counted on "Black Jack," a whaleman, to find their freedom through the organized Underground Railroad. Frederick Douglass, who caulked whaling ships, became an active member of the Anti-Slavery Society; and Captain Paul Cuffe, who owned several whaling ships, led a movement to free slaves.

A chapter about New Bedford whalers comes next, showing that town's bustling 2nergy, growth, and daring characteristics as the center of the abolitionist movement and a vital whaling port. Whalers played a significant role in the freedom of slaves. For example, in the 1850s, about 700 African Americans lived in New Bedford. Their businesses experienced more success there :han anywhere else in the country. A coalition between Quakers and African Americans created a major station for the Underground Railroad. This "railroad" provided whaling ship owners with crewmembers and assisted slaves escaping to Canada.

The McKissacks describe the crew of a typical whaling ship, its provisions, and its ridiculously low pay, called a lay. They illustrate a voyage from beginning to end, with its hazards, seasickness, and adventure. They write about whalers that defected at ports and the impact of the Gold Rush. The authors describe how the presence of women changed the journeys.

The book concludes with Captain William Shorey and the last days of whaling.



Due to the competition of electricity and crude oil, the price of whalebone and oil gradually declined so that it no longer remained profitable to outfit a whaler. The last whaler departed from New Bedford on September 5, 1917, never to be heard from again.



Topics for Discussion

- 1. Examine the role of Quakers in helping African Americans escape slavery.
- 2. How did whaling change as a lucrative business over the course of its history?

What events prompted these changes?

What ended whaling?

3. People of the era made a choice to continue with the hardships of whaling or to travel the rough roads out west in search of gold during the Gold Rush.

Which opportunity would you pursue and why?

- 4. What characteristics did the women whalers have? Why were they known as the captain's "best mate?"
- 5. The well-paid business of whaling for oil and ivory lost its fascination when other forms of energy arose: crude oil and electricity. Do you foresee a time when electricity and crude oil will become unprofitable because of a better form of energy? Argue your case.
- 6. Whalers left home for years at a time. If your family experienced this kind of separation today, what do you believe would happen?
- 7. Describe in sequential order the proclamations and acts listed in the book that deal with the institution and abolishment of slavery.
- 8. List three prominent African-American whalers described in the McKissacks' book. What made them special and memorable?
- 9. The Native Americans, experienced whalers and master harpooners, aided the Pilgrims in the early days of whaling. Do you believe that the nation's leaders of the era treated Native Americans equitably, considering their contribution? Why or why not?
- 10. As a whaler's wife, your husband would have been gone for three to four years on each journey. How would you handle this? How could you get help in raising your children?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

- 1. People who helped free slaves were called abolitionists. Examine the history of the abolitionist movement, its leaders, and its Underground Railroad.
- 2. Research how to create a biography.

What characteristics would you look for in a person? How would you gather information? How could you create a timeline?

- 3. Compare and contrast the life of a historical person with your life. Use a timeline, photographs, and drawings to aid in your comparison.
- 4. Make a model of a 1800s whaling ship as you research its parts. Using this replica, explain each part and its purpose. Describe why ship builders used certain woods for each section.
- 5. Describe boating terms: e.g., starboard, port, bow, and stern. Your mission is to train your "greenie" classmates before their first adventure on a whaling boat.
- 6. Scrimshaw, the maritime folk art of carving objects, uses whalebone, whale teeth, ivory, or walrus tusks on which to engrave scenes, frequently illustrating whaling life. Research the art form, scrimshaw.
- 7. The Quakers played a significant role in respecting African Americans as equals. Examine the Quakers, their traditions, and customs.
- 8. Pretend you are living during the 1800s in the whaling days. As a captain of a whaler, make a poster to recruit your crew.
- 9. Develop a fictitious journal as the wife of a captain on a whaler.
- 10. Compare and contrast whaling songs in the book. Compose your own whaling song.
- 11. Describe the Gold Rush of the 1800s.

How did it affect whaling? The U.S.

economy? Business opportunities?

12. Captain Paul Cuffe, a Nantucket African-American whaler, spent thirty years at sea. He published Captain Paul Cuffe's Logs and Letters, 1808-1817: An AfricanAmerican Quaker's "Voice from Within the Veil," about his adventures. Read it and prepare a class presentation.



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Medlar, Andrew. Review of Black Hands, White Sails: The Story of African-American Whalers. School Library Journal (DecemThe Diary of Nellie Lee Love, the Great Migraber 1999): 154.

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Meyer, Randy. Review of Black Hands, WhiteIn Young, Black, and Determined: A BiograSails: The Story of African-American Whalers.

phy of Lorraine Hansberry, the authors tell of Hansberry's identification, from an early age, with those of her race who suffered the effects of poverty and discrimination. She left college prematurely to move to New York to start a writing career. Throughout her thirty-four-year life, she dedicated her work to civil rights, making important contributions as a writer, a speaker, and an activist.

Set in 1859, A Picture of Freedom: The Diary of Clotee, a Slave Girl, tells of twelveyearold orphan Clotee, a house slave who must hide her ability to read and write, and who records her experiences in her secret diary. Readers share in her struggle to decide whether to escape to freedom or stay behind on the plantation as a conductor on the Underground Railroad.

By relating to the challenges established in these works, young adults can face today's similar moral issues: combating racial inequality, defining civil liberties, and eliminating hate. They can use critical thinking and personal responsibility as they mature and move into the world. Booklist (September 1,1999): 77.



Related Titles/Adaptations

The whaling business and its infrastructure had a profound impact on the economies of the world. The ethical questions posed then about racial inequity are relevant today.

The McKissacks offer many choices of books that encourage young adults to understand the pain of racial inequality. Among the most recent works are Rebels against Slavery: American Slave Revolts, a carefully researched book that praises heroes such as Cinque, an African captive who John Quincy Adams, Nat Turner, and Harriet Tubman defended before the U.S. Supreme Court. It earned a Coretta Scott King Honor Award and an ALA Best Book for Young Adults award.

The authors explore the themes of social class and racial inequity on an individual and institutional level through the journal entries of eleven-year-old Nellie Lee Love, an African-American girl in Color Me Dark:



Related Web Sites

Adelson, Bruce. Review of Black Hands, White Sails. Children's Literature http://www.childrenslit.com/f mckissack.html.

March 11,2002. This web site serves as a database for reviews of children's books.

"Patricia and Fredrick McKissack." Authors Online Library: Patricia and Fredrick McKissack's Biography. Scholastic.com
http://teacher.scholastic.com/authorsandbooks/authors/mckiss/bio.htm. March 11, 2002.'
This web site provides a brief biographical note about the McKissacks and their work.

"Patricia and Fredrick McKissack." "Learn to write a biography with the McKissacks."

Scholastic.com http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/biograph/index.htm.

March 11, 2002. The McKissacks instruct the reader in a step-by-step approach to writing biography.

"Patricia and Fredrick McKissack." "Meet the Author: Patricia and Fredrick McKissack." Eduplace.com http://www.eduplace.com/kids/hmr/mtai/mckissack.html. March 11,2002. Biographical note, bibliography, and advice for aspiring African-American writers are available here.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series) ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series) ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature ☐ Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction ☐ 19th century ☐ Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction ☐ 20th century ☐ Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3 dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996