



Américas Award Books on Civil Rights

A de Activista, Martha E. Gonzalez; illustrated by Innosanto Nagara.

A de Activista is a Spanish language board book that invites younger and older readers alike to have a conversation about social justice. Each page segues into a different discussion by progressing through the Spanish spoken alphabet. The topics are radical, intriguing, and diverse. Written in Spanish and rooted in Latino/Hispanic culture, the book is a rare call to action. Eye-grabbing colors and compelling multimedia illustrations pull the reader in, while emphatic syntax and punctuation complement the vivid imagery. Both text and visuals depict people of all backgrounds and fiercely reinforce advocacy related to respect, resistance, and empowerment across communities. Given the language and cultural referents, readers of all ages will appreciate this publication. Younger readers will appreciate the colors and alliteration, while older readers will be able to delve into the sociopolitical implications. K+. **2015 Commended Title.**

Before We Were Free, Julia Alvarez.

Twelve-year-old Anita de la Torre's life changes suddenly when her cousins and friends must abruptly leave the country. What's more, she learns the extent to which members of her own family, particularly her uncle and father, are involved as leaders in the plot to overthrow El Jefe, dictator of the Dominican Republic. Using her keen powers of observation, Anita begins to understand the danger involved as she witnesses people taking great risks to gain freedom. Julia Alvarez's portrayal of a courageous female protagonist brings to life for young readers the hardships endured by families who participate in democracy's struggle. **2002 Américas Award Winner**

Breaking Through, Francisco Jiménez.

A welcomed sequel to his award winning novel *The Circuit* (1997), the autobiographical journey of the son in a family of migrant farmworkers continues. Readers come to learn that Panchito, deported to Mexico when it seemed that his hardworking family was finally on the roads to some financial solvency, makes it back to the U.S. with his documentation in order. In the convincing voice of a young adolescent, we hear the details of his life in California in the early sixties. Not only in the fields but also throughout his high school experiences, we see Panchito straddle two worlds. He continues to be the hardworking, dutiful son in an economically struggling immigrant family and also dedicates himself to his role as a conscientious and respected student at Santa Clara High School. **2001 Americas Award Winner**

Caminar, Skila Brown.

This is a work of historical fiction, set during Guatemala's civil war. It is the first-person account by the indigenous boy Carlos, whose happy life is destroyed when war comes to his village while



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he is in the forest gathering mushrooms. Alone in the forest, he struggles to stay alive, avoid soldiers and rebels, and as he communes with the forest he recalls various people and traditions of his village. Ultimately, the boy who was once afraid of the dark saves the people of his grandmother's village from an attack by government forces. The book shines as a work of literature. Written in free verse, including some compelling examples of concrete poetry, it is a story of indigenous culture, war, and what it means to be a man. Grades 5-12. **2015**

Commended Title.

Cesar Chavez: Crusader for Social Change, Brenda Haugen.

Brenda Haugen's biography of Cesar Chavez is an inviting and thorough exploration of this American civil rights leader. The high quality production of expository text and photographic features, explores Chavez' migrant childhood, years of activism through peaceful strikes and boycotts that established better working conditions for farm laborers all over America. Grades 4-8. **2009 Commended Title.**

César Chávez: A Photographic Essay, Ilan Stavans.

The book presents the life and work of America's foremost farm labor leader/social activist during the formative years of the Civil Rights Era. Chavez's vocation was grounded in his Catholic faith, his commitment to racial justice, and his organizing skills. Factual and poignant text accompanies vivid black-and-white photographs that capture the complex spirit of the times. It gives the reader an intimate view of the struggles and victories of Chavez's passions and life work. The text provides a strong foundation for understanding Chavez and his importance in American history. Grades 5-12. **2011 Commended Title.**

The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child, Francisco Jiménez.

The dream of this family from rural Jalisco, Mexico is to go north, cross la frontera and leave poverty behind. Papá, mamá and two young boys make the long journey and cross the barbed wire barricade without being spotted by la migra. In California, they join "the circuit" of migrant workers following the crops to be picked: strawberries, cotton, carrots. The author poignantly weaves the family's customs, beliefs and hopes with the cruel reality of never ending migrant labor camps from which escape is nearly impossible. The family's culture, rich in stories, love, and endurance nurtures its growth to ten members in the new environment where the dream is nearly lost. The independently told stories lend themselves to being read out loud to a wide range of audiences. Grades 6-8. **1997 Américas Award Winner**

Crossing the Wire, Will Hobbs.

When falling crop prices threaten his family with starvation, fifteen-year-old Victor Flores heads north in an attempt to "cross the wire" from Mexico into the United States so he can find work and send money home. But with no coyote money to pay the smugglers who sneak illegal workers across the border, Victor must struggle to survive as he jumps trains, stows away on trucks, and hikes grueling miles through the Arizona desert. Victor's journey is fraught with danger, freezing cold, scorching heat, hunger and dead ends. It's a gauntlet run by millions



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attempting to cross the border. Through Victor's often desperate struggle, Will Hobbs brings to life one of the great human dramas of our time. **2006 Commended Title**

The Disappeared, Gloria Whelan.

To Silvia, her brother has simply "disappeared," like so many other citizens who oppose the military dictatorship of 1970's Argentina. In alternating chapters, the siblings try to figure how to survive while recalling the events that led up to Eduardo's arrest. Silvia thinks she can help Eduardo if she gives in to the advances of the son of a high ranking general, and while she has not been arrested, her plans put her in many dangerous situations. Eduardo worries that his sister will be taken next, and will endure any amount of torture and pressure from his jailers to prevent further harm to his family. Through these two perspectives, readers meet other characters including family members and friends who cope with the terror in different ways, some actively opposing and protesting the government, and others fleeing the country. Grades 9-12. **2009 Commended Title.**

Dolores Huerta: Labor Leader and Civil Rights Activist, Robin S. Doak.

Although most people think of Cesar Chavez as the driving force behind the National Farmworkers Association, Dolores Huerta also played a significant role in obtaining equal rights for farm workers. Known for her passion and uncompromising determination, the fiery mother of eleven was the "hands and heart" of the union, organizing boycotts, pickets, and marches. This engaging biography describes the life and accomplishments of this dedicated social activist, lobbyist, and advocate. Grades 5-8. **2009 Commended Title.**

Enrique's Journey, Sonia Nazario.

At its heart, *Enrique's Journey* is a "true story of a boy determined to reunite with his mother." Factually, it is a journalist's account of young migrants' traumatic and perilous experiences as they travel unaccompanied from Central America to the United States. Inspired by the family histories of immigrants in her community, Sonia Nazario undertook to thoroughly research and document the experiences of young adults' journey northward. The outcome is *Enrique's Journey* – a text which addresses both the nuances of the migrants' personal lives as well as the structural forces which influence their decision and affect their journey. It is a gripping narrative. She originally published the research in 2002 with the *Los Angeles Times*, and since then has adapted it to various audiences, with the most recent iteration tailored to young people. In its latest form, *Enrique's Journey* offers young readers not only an accessible means of deepening their understanding about the issues surrounding immigration, but, more importantly, ample reason to empathize with those who undergo its travails. Grades 9-12. **2014 Commended Title.**

Esperanza Rising, Pam Muñoz Ryan.

Twelve-year-old Esperanza leads a privileged life as the only child in a prominent family living in Mexico in the 1930s. But when her father dies, she experiences a drastic change of fortune, and she and her mother must eek out a living by going north to California as migrant workers. More than a mere riches-to-rags story, Pam Muñoz Ryan skillfully weaves history and social issues into a compelling story based on the author's grandmother's childhood. Outstanding



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characterizations, a well-developed sense of place, and a strong story line mark this fine historical novel. Grades 4-8. **2000 Honorable Mention.**

The Firefly Letters, Margarita Engle.

Beginning with a letter dated 1851, this book follows the historical visit of Swedish suffragette Frederika Bremer to Cuba. Written as poems from three different women of diverse backgrounds, this book explores the cultural history of Cuba and slavery as well as women's rights through three unique perspectives. The beautiful prose weaves an important account of Cuba in the mid-1800s. Grades 6-12. **2011 Honorable Mention.**

From North to South / Del norte al Sur, René Colato Laínez; illustrated by Joe Cepeda.

Immigration and deportation are foreshadowed in a striking way in the end pages of this bilingual picture book, presenting a detailed map of the major freeways between San Diego and Tijuana. Illustrations with gentle, loving images stand juxtaposed to the depth of pain experienced by young José at the recent deportation of his mother to Mexico. José misses his mother's bedtime stories and their time spent gardening together, and can hardly wait to see her as Papá's car creeps slowly through border traffic to visit her in Tijuana. The author is donating a portion of the proceeds from this book to El Centro Madre Assunta, a refuge for immigrant women and children in Tijuana. Grades K-3. **2011 Commended Title**

Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez, Kathleen Krull; illustrated by Yuyi Morales.

Krull has written a very personal and appealing biography of César Chávez, founder of the National Farm Workers' Association. The captivating illustrations of Yuyi Morales show Chávez within his communities of family, field and protest. His story, from boyhood to labor leader, emphasizes that intelligence, sensitivity and a commitment to social justice on the part of one individual can indeed help change the world. As Chávez says at one point in the story, "nonviolence takes more guts." The story's momentum builds (as did the farm workers' movement) from the early, somewhat solitary efforts of Chávez to the 1966 march on Sacramento that began with 68 people and ended in a gathering of 10,000 in the California capital. Grades 3-5. **2003 Honorable Mention.**

I Lived on Butterfly Hill, Marjorie Agosín.

Marjorie Agosín, award-winning poet and critic, brings us a touching and lively tale of 11-year-old Celeste Marconi, a Chilean girl whose life changes when her country is taken over by the 1973 military coup. Celeste's liberal-leaning parents are doctors who help the poor and are considered "subversives." They decide that for her safety, it would be better to send her out of the country for a while. *I Lived on Butterfly Hill* is a story told in three parts: Celeste's innocent and carefree childhood in Valparaíso, her story of making a new life in "el norte" with her aunt who lives in Maine, and her eventual return to her beloved home on Butterfly Hill. Along the way, Celeste discovers poetry, a new language, friends where she least expects them, and courage. Because Celeste's Jewish grandmother, Abuela Frida, fled Nazi Germany, there are several parallels with her story and Celeste's. It is an accessible novel to approach many serious



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topics for younger readers. Peppered with whimsical illustrations by Lee White, it is a story that would appeal to a high middle reader or a young adult reader. **2015 Commended Title.**

Journey of Dreams, Marge Pellegrino.

In this modern Underground Railroad adventure, Tomasa flees the scorched earth of her Mayan village for safe refuge in the United States. The journey with her father and two brothers takes us over mountains, through rivers and across deserts, and finally into the safety of Arizona's Sanctuary Movement, where her family reunites and begins anew as Guatemalan refugees. Tomasa's narrative woven with Mayan folktales is an important, relevant, and heart-felt history lesson that should be shared so this Central American tragedy is not forgotten. Grades 6-8. **2010 Commended Title.**

The Lightning Dreamer: Cuba's Greatest Abolitionist, Margarita Engle.

In light of severe persecution and censorship, many of 19th century Cuba's staunchest abolitionists were poets who proclaimed their message in metaphor. In *The Lightning Dreamer*, Engle tells the fictionalized biography of the poet, abolitionist and feminist Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda, also known as 'Tula'. The young protagonist resisted arranged marriage at the age of 14 and was henceforth sent away from home to live with extended family. The young girl defied the commonly held belief of the time that girls were 'expected to live without thoughts,' as she expressed herself skillfully in poetry. Engle captures the spirit of this budding young poet through verse which is at once light and lyrical, and heavy in references to the injustices of the era. In Engle's account, Tula writes 'I rise up out of a nightmare and grasp a feather pen, feeling winged.' Just as Tula found freedom in her poetry, Engle leaves the reader feeling hopeful, inspired and empowered by the story of this young brave girl who fought for justice for girls, women and slaves. (Grades 4-9). **2014 Commended Title.**

La Línea, Ann Jaramillo.

The hope of reuniting with his parents starts Miguel on his quest to cross the border. Just barely fifteen, Miguel gets a note from his father to seek out help to cross to California. Torn between leaving his grandmother and sister and heading toward a promise for something better, Miguel makes preparations to leave his home. The dangers of being an illegal immigrant forced to use coyotes are compounded when Elena, Miguel's younger sister decides to follow him. This contemporary realistic novel addresses some of the dangers, challenges, and emotions immigrants crossing the border face. Grades 7- 12. **2006 Commended Title.**

La Mariposa, Francisco Jiménez; Illustrated by Simón Silva.

Francisco, the son of migrant workers, has difficulty adjusting to a new school because he doesn't speak or understand English and, to make matters worse, the class bully seems to have it in for him. Simón Silva's use of orange and black in his paintings underscores the author's subtle use of a monarch butterfly to symbolize Francisco's metamorphosis. **1998 Commended Title**



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Migrant: The Journey of a Mexican Worker, José Manuel Mateo; Illustrated by Javier Martínez Pedro.

This handsome picture book is constructed accordion style, like an Aztec codex. Unfold it in one direction, and it reads in Spanish—in the other, English. The spare text runs in a column down the left side, while one long pen and ink drawing recalling Mexican amate paintings, rich in intricate detail, runs the length of the book. In it, a young Mexican boy tells about life in his village and the precarious, harrowing journey he and his mother and sister take to the U.S., hopeful of finding his father and work. Told in a very accessible way for young children, this is an important, timely story, and it is followed by an author's note about migrant children and various reasons for emigrating, as well as information about amate codices. Grades 2-5. **2015 Honorable Mention.**

Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale, Duncan Tonatiuh.

Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote opens with festive scenes of the Rabbit family preparing for Papá Rabbit's homecoming. Musicians, family and friends gather to welcome home Papá who had traveled north to work in the carrot and lettuce fields, years before. Plates of mole, rice and beans are prepared in anticipation of his arrival and the house is strung with papel picado. When Papá Rabbit doesn't arrive, his son Pancho decides to sneak away in the dark of the night to find him. The reader follows the young rabbit as he travels north with the aid of a sneaky coyote by train, by river, by tunnel, and by desert. Tonatiuh bravely presents the controversial issue of illegal immigration through the lens of a children's fable. Inspired by 14th century Mixtec codices and traditional folklore, the author / illustrator presents the sometimes startling realities of many modern day immigrants in a form which can be appreciated by both young and old alike. Grades K-4. **2014 Honorable Mention.**

The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano, Margarita Engle; Illustrated by Sean Qualls.

Born into the household of a wealthy slave owner in Cuba in 1797, Juan Francisco Manzano spent his early years by the side of a woman who made him call her Mama, even though he had a mama of his own. Denied an education, young Juan still showed an exceptional talent for poetry. His verses reflect the beauty of his world, but they also expose its hideous cruelty. Powerful, haunting poems and breathtaking illustrations create a portrait of a life in which even the pain of slavery could not extinguish the capacity for hope. Grades 7-12. **2006 Américas Award Winner.**

Portraits of Hispanic American Heroes, Juan Felipe Herrera, with paintings by Raúl Colón.

This beautifully illustrated series of biographies of notable Hispanic Americans provides a necessary and well-written resource for a classroom or library. The author, Chicano poet Juan Felipe Herrera, who was just named the 2015 U.S. Poet Laureate, includes figures spanning from the 1700s with Bernardo de Gálvez, for whom the city of Galveston is named, to Ellen Ochoa (b. 1958), the first Latina astronaut and former Director of the Johnson Space Center. Herrera includes biographies of 19 men and women who have made outstanding contributions to the arts, politics, science, humanitarianism, and athletics. He includes well-known Hispanic Americans,



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such as Desi Arnaz, Roberto Clemente, and Sonia Sotomayor, as well as lesser known ones, such as David Glasgow Farragut, Julia de Burgos, and Helen Rodriguez-Trias. In the final section, Herrera includes “Hero Street, USA,” a group remembrance of the Mexican-Americans from Silvis, IL. The Department of Defense reported that there is no street of similar size where so many men and women left home in order to join the U.S. Armed forces. Grades 3-7. **2015**

Commended Title

Reaching Out, Francisco Jiménez.

The sequel to Jiménez’s *Breaking Through* and *The Circuit*, this autobiographical book, set in the 1960s, tells of the author’s experiences as a poor immigrant from Mexico to the United States. His family struggles to earn enough from agricultural work to make ends meet each month and faces hardships due to their economic situation, as well as the cultural and linguistic divide. As a result of hard work and the sacrifices that Pachito and his family make, he is able to enroll in college. Despite the changing times and cultural specificity of this book, the lessons in this autobiographical account offer hope to the children of other poor immigrant families in the United States. Grades 7-12. **2009 Commended Title.**

The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano, Sonia Manzano

Puerto Rican teenager Evelyn Serrano experiences two revolutions: the Young Lords coming to her community in East Harlem and her own coming of age. The two intertwine, making this an engaging and educational story for middle and high school students. Sonia Manzano sets this historical fiction in 1969, when the Young Lords occupy a church, calling attention to the need for free breakfast and other community programs. The book is an ideal introduction for students to the Young Lords, a key yet seldom taught story Puerto Ricans in the modern Civil Rights Movement. Grades 5-8. **2013 Américas Award Winner.**

The Secret Side of Empty, Maria E. Andreu.

Blonde and fair skinned, Monserrat Thalia (M.T. to her friends), from Argentina, has good friends and a boyfriend, is actively involved in her high school and on track to become her high school’s valedictorian. But as graduation approaches and her classmates are excited about the prospect of going to college, the secret she has kept from them haunts her: She is an undocumented immigrant and therefore, and, to her mind, ineligible to attend college in the U.S. Depressed about her future, she gives up on it. She cuts class, stops doing homework, and her grades plummet. Her boyfriend becomes estranged from her, she considers suicide, and relations with her abusive father become untenable. Finally she gets the help she needs to go to college, and when President Obama announces the DREAMER Act, she can finally relax and enjoy the life she has dreamed of. The tone of the novel’s writing is perfectly suited to each situation; the dialogue and narrative are finely composed, though the ending is not as finely imagined as the rest of the book.. Grades 9+. **2015 Commended Title.**



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Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez & Her Family's Fight for Desegregation, Duncan Tonatiuh.

Seven years before the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* addressed segregation in schools throughout the country, the similarly significant but less known case of *Mendez vs. Westminster School District* challenged school segregation in California. Author and illustrator Duncan Tonatiuh has made this history available to young readers everywhere for the first time as he documents Sylvia Mendez and her family's fight for desegregation through the book *Separate is Never Equal*. The text pays tribute to this historical moment of social justice and the people who made it happen by drawing on court testimonies and personal interviews to ensure authenticity and accuracy. An author's note, glossary of legal terms, and bibliography complement the text and provide both younger and older readers with valuable resources for understanding the case's development and its ongoing implications. In addition to the meticulous text, readers will enjoy Tonatiuh's signature artistry as he draws upon Mesoamerican codices to create modern, multimedia collages of the Mendez family alongside people from their school, community, and trial. Grades 1-6. **2015 Américas Award Winner.**

Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal, Margarita Engle.

With her characteristic economic yet moving verse Margarita Engle once again transports us to a world and time that few writers have explored, especially in the genre of children's literature. *Silver People* tells the story of the building of the Panama Canal, which opened in 1914 and connected the two largest oceans in the world, while at the same time signaling America's emergence as a global superpower. The canal was a miraculous engineering feat that created a path of water through a tropical jungle where a mountain once stood. Yet miracles often come with a steep price. Thousands of Caribbean Americans lost their lives, Engle gives these workers a voice, transporting us to the bottom of "serpentine cut" and describing the backbreaking labor required to accomplish it. We are also treated to the voices of the natural world that loudly or silently protest while their habitat is destroyed. Grades 7 and up. **2015 Américas Award Winner.**

Strike! The Farm Workers' Fight for their Rights, Larry Dane Brimner.

The 2014 release of the film *César Chávez* brought his achievements with the United Farm Workers union of the 1960s and 1970s back into the spotlight. This book, *Strike!*, which is meticulously researched by Larry Dane Brimner, tells a much fuller story. Beginning with the Filipino farm worker's strike of 1965 in Delano, California, moving through the conflict between the Filipinos and Mexican braceros, "years of consumer boycotts, beatings, arrests, and sacrifice," and ending with the legacy of the successful nonviolent movement of the United Farm Workers, this book tells the compelling story of a courageous group of people. Brimner is careful to include major figures besides Chávez, including Dolores Huerta, Larry Itliong, Robert F. Kennedy, and others. Grades 6-9. **2015 Honorable Mention.**

The Surrender Tree: Poems of Cuba's Struggle for Freedom, Margarita Engle.

Written in breathtaking verse, *The Surrender Tree* portrays Cuba's three wars for independence spanning thirty years in the nineteenth century. As with her previous book: *Juan Francisco*



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Manzano, the Poet Slave of Cuba, Engle develops the story by presenting different points of view, especially from Rosa, a freed slave. Rosa, known in Cuba as Rosa la Bayomesa, healed the injured during the wars, turning caves into hospitals, using wild plants as her medicines. In a final proof of her humanity she treats the lieutenant who has sworn to kill her. The book describes the suffering and horrors during the wars, including the first systematic use of concentration camps, but the main message of the book is that freedom exists only when everyone shares it. Grades 8-10. **2009 Américas Award Winner.**

Sylvia and Aki, Winifred Conkling.

Upon the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Aki and the members of her family are forced from their home and sent to internment camps along with thousands of other Japanese-Americans. A young Mexican American girl by the name of Sylvia Mendez moves into Aki's empty home with her family. Once the family learns that the Mendez children are restricted to the 'Mexican' public school on the other side of town, the father takes lead in the fight against school segregation. Conkling parallels the two experiences as each family struggles to hold onto their own cultural identity and fight for equality. This first-hand account of how segregation affected California children during the 1940's educates the reader on the Japanese-American internment camps, as well as the Mendez vs. Westminster case, which led to the desegregation of California schools and later set a model for the end of segregation nationwide. Told through the eyes of two young girls, Sylvia and Aki shows how friendship, family, and community can cross all racial, ethnic, linguistic, and national boundaries. **2012 Commended Title.**

Tonight by Sea, Frances Temple.

As governmental brutality and poverty become unbearable, Paulie joins with others in her small Haitian village to help her uncle secretly build a boat they will use to escape to the United States. The story, told from Paulie's point of view, sensitively weaves political and economic issues into the cultural fabric of the characters. With a subtle touch, Temple gives a very real sense of life in Haiti before Aristide's return. Beyond the poverty, she shows the strength and community that media images often fail to capture. **1995 Américas Award Winner**

Tropical Secrets: Holocaust Refugees in Cuba, Margarita Engle.

Told from the points of view of different characters, Engle's novel in verse explores the connections among different parts of the world during World War II. When Daniel escapes Nazi Germany and lands in Cuba, he must learn to adjust to life without his family in a new country. He befriends Paloma, a girl whose father (El Gordo) profits from shipping refugees to Cuba. David, an adult refugee who sells ice cream in Havana, also contributes his point of view to this gripping story. Grades 6-9. **2010 Commended Title.**