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# Becoming Billie Holiday



## Synopsis

Before the legend of Billie Holiday, there was a girl named Eleanora. In 1915, Sadie Fagan gave birth to a daughter she named Eleanora. The world, however, would know her as Billie Holiday, possibly the greatest jazz singer of all time. Eleanora's journey into legend took her through pain, poverty, and run-ins with the law. By the time she was fifteen, she knew she possessed something that could possibly change her life—a voice. Eleanora could sing. Her remarkable voice led her to a place in the spotlight with some of the era's hottest big bands. Billie Holiday sang as if she had lived each lyric, and in many ways she had. Through a sequence of raw and poignant poems, award-winning poet Carole Boston Weatherford chronicles Eleanora Fagan's metamorphosis into Billie Holiday. The author examines the singer's young life, her fight for survival, and the dream she pursued with passion in this Coretta Scott King Author Honor winner. With stunning art by Floyd Cooper, this book provides a revealing look at a cultural icon.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Grade 8 Up—  
•In this fictionalized memoir, Weatherford has composed nearly 100 first-person narrative poems that detail Holiday's life from birth until age 25, the age at which she debuted her signature song, "Strange Fruit." The poems borrow their titles from Holiday's songs, a brilliant device that provides readers with a haunting built-in sound track. Weatherford's language is straightforward and accessible—almost conversational. She captures the woman's jazzy, candid voice so adroitly that at times the poems seem like they could have been lifted wholesale from Holiday's autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues*. Cooper's sepia-toned,

nostalgic, mixed-media illustrations provide an emotional counterpoint to the text. Resembling old photographs seen through a lens of aching hindsight, they make explicit the pain that Weatherford studiously avoids giving full voice to in her poems. Although Holiday's early life was one of relentless rejection, discrimination, and poverty, the author stays true to her subject and maintains a resolute and defiant tone, albeit one tinged with regret. Prostitution, rape, jail time, and violence are mentioned, but the book ends on the proverbial high note, before the singer's drug use, alcoholism, and early death. This captivating title places readers solidly into Holiday's world, and is suitable for independent reading as well as a variety of classroom uses. — Paula Willey, Baltimore County Public Library, Towson, MD Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

In a series of free-verse poems and bluesy lyrics, headed by song titles, Weatherford retraces Holiday's childhood and early career in the renowned jazz singer's own voice. — "At eleven, I had the body / of a grown woman, / the mouth of a sailor, and a temper / hot enough to fry an egg. — Growing up in Baltimore, she moved to Harlem with her sometimes-absent mother after being molested by a neighbor, and quickly fell in love with late-night life. Dubbed "Lady Day," she earned money singing in clubs, was — "discovered" by jazz-enthusiast John Hammond, and battled racism on a groundbreaking tour with Artie Shaw's all-white band. Closing with Holiday's spectacular headline gig at the Caf  Society, where she sang "Strange Fruit" — "how could I not claim: / this is my song? — Weatherford leaves the 25-year-old at a high spot in her career, before later troubles and drug addiction. After the whole story readers will find a generous assortment of recommended reading and listening at the end of this proud, clear-voiced testimonial. Grades 6-9.

--John Peters

good

A delightful "read" --- happy/sad scenes of Holiday's early life presented with titles from songs she sang. Glad I read it.

Very good

I wanted to know more about Billie Holiday and was looking forward to receiving my book. when I got it, imagine my disappointment to find this is a book of lyrics.....YOU GOT ME!

The book has some serious subjects, much like the music of Billie Holiday. In fact much of the poetry at the beginning of the book will make you gasp. Thus, I would not read the poems to younger kids. After a glomming opening, the story brightens up in the second part of the volume, her words allow you to exhale. To conclude, I enjoyed reading the verse, but I wondered if the stories in the poems were true-it wasn't until I read the afterwords that I found out that the stories were fiction.

It is surprising that Carole Boston Weatherford, author of *Becoming Billie Holiday*, has won poetry awards. The "Non-Violent Social Change Coretta Scott King Award" seems justifiable if it was given based on Weatherford's intentions in writing *Becoming Billie Holiday*. The purpose of Weatherford's work is to educate young adults and children about historical figures and societal issues. However, despite Weatherford's educational content, I hesitate to praise her poetry. Telling Holiday's story through her fictional perspective is an ingenious idea, but it is executed poorly. Weatherford's narrative is too broken and underdeveloped and her writing is weak, grammatically and stylistically. A problem immediately apparent in Weatherford's choice of poetry as a writing medium is the lack of plot and character development. There are also many instances where conflict is abrupt and brief, such as in "I'll Never Be the Same" and "Love for Sale." I think it would have been better if Weatherford had eliminated the poems that try to make this book a sequenced novel, such as "Bridge: I Cover the Waterfront," which is forced and blandly informative. Instead, the focus should be on specific, significant moments in Billie's life. Stylistically, Weatherford's poems are also weak. The line breaks are awkward in that they do not flow when read--the line breaks actually make reading more difficult. The choice of songs for some of the poem titles is irrelevant to the poem's theme and ignores the songs' themes. It is misleading and an injustice to the songs to change their context and meaning by matching them with nonrelated poems. I would not give this book to students as an example of literature, though I might show it to a very young reader specifically interested in this book.

Carole Boston Weatherford is a class act. I don't know if there's anything I can say which will do this poet justice. How hard it must have been to detail the emotional ups and downs of Billie Holiday's life when there's no actual way of getting into Billy Holiday's skin. The middle of this book dragged a bit for me, but the beginning and ending were brilliant. This poem, wow: With Thee I Swing Racism

ripped America at the seams, and jazz stitched the nation together one song at a time. But music alone couldn't mend the tear. The needle pricked my finger still my soul was sore, and I longed to hop a train for home. Having grown up well after this era, it's hard for me to imagine such a bitter landscape. But Weatherford paints the scene so that I can imagine it. The music of Billie Holiday now takes on more meaning for me

Wowie, wow, wow. This little beauty just leapt to the top of my wish list. I've had my eye on Carole Boston Weatherford ever since she wrote *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom* (Caldecott Honor Book), but as far as I'm concerned she's topped it with *Becoming Billie Holiday*. The writing is killer and the format unique: an illustrated fictional verse memoir. And get this -- the title of each poem is a Billie Holiday song. I know next to nothing about Billie Holiday's life, but fictional or not, I'm perfectly content getting all my information here. My sense is that Weatherford was true to her subject; regardless, I don't care to break this book's spell with plain old facts. Straight non-fiction would be hard pressed to duplicate the imagery and sense of character Weatherford's poems convey. To crown it all, I don't think you even have to be a Holiday fan to dig this book. Lady Day had it rough, and her childhood makes for compelling reading. Among other things there's prostitution, rape, racism, and reefer in here -- none of it tawdry, but gritty enough to rule out the elementary school crowd.

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