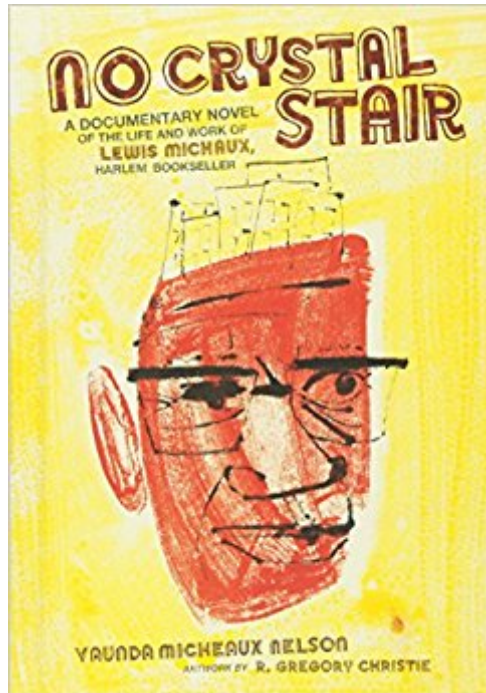




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No Crystal Stair (Coretta Scott King Author Honor Books)



Synopsis

A documentary novel of the life and work of Lewis Michaux, Harlem bookseller 'You can't walk straight on a crooked line. You do you'll break your leg. How can you walk straight in a crooked system?' Lewis Michaux was born to do things his own way. When a white banker told him to sell fried chicken, not books, because Negroes don't read,' Lewis took five books and one-hundred dollars and built a bookstore. It soon became the intellectual center of Harlem, a refuge for everyone from Muhammad Ali to Malcolm X. In *No Crystal Stair*, Coretta Scott King Award-winning author Vaunda Micheaux Nelson combines meticulous research with a storyteller's flair to document the life and times of her great uncle Lewis Michaux, an extraordinary literacy pioneer of the Civil Rights era. 'My life was no crystal stair, far from it. But I'm taking my leave with some pride. It tickles me to know that those folks who said I could never sell books to black people are eating crow. I'd say my seeds grew pretty damn well. And not just the book business. It's the more important business of moving our people forward that has real meaning.'

Book Information

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Age Range: 12 - 17 years

Grade Level: 7 - 12

Customer Reviews

Vaunda Micheaux Nelson is the author of many books for young readers, including *Bad News for Outlaws: The Remarkable Life of Bass Reeves*, Deputy U.S. Marshal, which won the Coretta Scott

King Award in 2010, and *Almost to Freedom*, which won a Coretta Scott King Honor for Colin Bootman's illustrations in 2007. Vaunda is a youth services librarian at the public library in Rio Rancho, New Mexico, where she lives with her husband. To write *No Crystal Stair*, Vaunda spent years researching Lewis Michaux's life. She conducted interviews, sifted through library collections, examined family archives, and interviewed those who knew Michaux. In the end though, the man's full story (and even his date of birth) remained elusive. Only the tools of fiction could make a complete portrait.

We hear about the Civil Rights movement, the Memphis riots, bussing but this is the other side of the same coin. How one man prevailed against the odds, the prejudices and culture of the time to become a success story. I am thankful to Vaunda Micheaux Nelson for writing it and that our Bookclub chose to read it. I read most of the book over long haul international flights across the Pacific. The book held my attention a lot longer than the movies on board. Nelson chose to use the first person in her narrative by allowing each character to speak his/her feelings and thoughts for him/herself. It was indeed a tour de force and the writer used the device of some imaginary characters to fill in the gaps. In the author's notes at the end of the book the writer lists the many obstacles she had to overcome such as missing dates and other documents. Nelson admits that she only visited the Bookstore once when she was 14 but did not realize its significance back then. Years later she was to become an award winning writer and children's librarian herself. She brings the characters to life and I'm sure if I had met Lewis in person I would have been impressed by him and would want to visit his bookstore and listen to the discussions taking place.

This book made me cry, smile, and want to learn more. How amazing to have a great uncle who was so instrumental in helping his fellow Black men and women not only learn how to educate themselves, but he also spread the amazing works of Black Americans. Louis had a younger life that we cannot even imagine. Full of pain, and loss. And yet he chose to rise above this, and do something so valuable, and so enriching for himself and his neighbors. This book made me seek out to learn more about Malcolm X. What an amazing man himself. This book is a must read for everyone! And I hope especially young people reach out and get this book. So fun to read, and so fulfilling.

This is a look at the life of bookseller Lewis Michaux. He was the founder and owner of the iconic National Memorial African Bookstore in Harlem, NY. The bookstore was in business for 40 years

and was often the site of many of Malcolm X's speeches. The store was distinct for its collection of books by, for and about African people. This at a time when publishing of black authors was minimal. So to amass the kind of collection he did took a lot of dedication. This book is a YA fictionalized biography of Lewis Michaux. By using this format, we get snippets from his life journey, and there are obvious parts of the story that cry out for depth. However, there is enough here to make this an enjoyable read, and to give you a sense of the man. Hopefully the existence of this YA version will lead to a fuller biography of Lewis Michaux.

I just introduced this book to a class of 6th-graders in Harlem, for whom it is, of course, local history. I told them that some of the people in the book are the protagonist's family and friends but that others are famous people. A good sign that someone is the latter is the kids' recognizing their name as one of a park or street: e.g., Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X.

A fantastic book and a great perspective on the civil rights movement! One of my favorites for sure.

Great story

An Addition to my Library

More than anything Lewis wanted a bicycle, but there wasn't any money for one. His father, John Henry Michaux, was a "smart Negro," but the money he made from his store wasn't enough for frivolous things like a bike. He told his son to pray "and the Lord will provide." Lewis did his own providing and went out and stole one. What was the sense of working when a boy could get one free for the taking? Lewis's mother, Blanche, who was "strung tight as a Banjo", made no effort to hide who was her favorite child and it sure wasn't that thief, Lewis. Lightfoot Solomon was her, a boy who was "born for greatness." When Lewis's mother was sent to Central State Hospital in Petersburg, Virginia for "nervous exhaustion," he began to act out even more than before. John Henry was exasperated by his fourteen-year-old son and was appalled when "The judge sentenced [his] boy to twenty lashes for stealing a sack of peanuts." Would the boy ever amount to anything or was he simply destined for a life of crime? His brother Lightfoot had little hope for him when five years later the boy ended up serving time on a chain gang. Blanche had high hopes for Lightfoot, but not that boy. Lewis would never be like Lightfoot, but when he read copies of "Negro World" with his father, there was an inkling of what he could be, how his life would change. Marcus Garvey

wrote that they needed "to take pride in our race, embrace our history." Lewis grew closer to his father and began to embrace Garvey's ideas. When John Henry died, his wayward son took a cool thousand and headed to Philly. Brother Norris was not far behind, nor was Lightfoot's comment that Lewis had "partnered with the Devil." Trouble was indeed on the horizon and it wasn't long before Lewis lost an eye when he was a bit too brazen with a police officer. He claimed that "sometime's it's a good idea to stay quiet," but would he? Could he? Lightfoot began preaching about God, while Norris became a pool shark and Lewis did some thinking. He was reading about and listening to the likes of Garvey and Frederick Douglass. Now they had something worthwhile to say. Not that Lightfoot's Church of God didn't but Lewis, who would one day be called "The Professor," believed that his people needed to read. They needed to read "books for black people, books about black people here and around the world." It was all about education, all about empowerment. With five books and a hundred dollar loan from the brother who wanted to write him off, Lewis started the National Memorial African Bookstore in Harlem. Was he a fool or would his dream become reality? This is an amazing book about Lewis Michaux, a black man who changed the course of history. An unlikely hero, this simple Harlem bookseller achieved his dream and in doing so spurred many others to achieve theirs as they empowered themselves. This book, written by Lewis's great-niece, superbly captured many voices that were instrumental in the African-American Civil Rights movement. I was fascinated by the evolution of the tale as Lewis, the young thief, turns his bookstore into a "major center of black nationalist thought and political activity." Although, out of necessity Vaunda Micheaux Nelson had to fictionalize the tale, the events and characters are based on fact. R. Gregory Christie's inimitable work graces the pages in this book. Interspersed throughout this book are numerous informative sidebars, photographs, and actual FBI materials. In the back of the book is a character index, remembrances, the Michaux family tree, extensive source notes, a bibliography, and additional recommended book resources to explore. Additional complimentary educational resources can be accessed on the publishers website. This book courtesy of the publisher.

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