

I Can Do It!

A selected book list to inspire hope

The following picture book biographies are excellent literary examples of ordinary people who have done extraordinary things. Each of these individuals displays remarkable courage and determination in overcoming difficult challenges to achieve their life dreams. I have seen firsthand the power books like these have for students who feel stuck in a life of poverty, racial discrimination, indifference, or major difficulties. Perhaps, most important, these stories show our children what's possible for their futures, no matter what their beginnings are, and nudge them to follow the advice Hank Aaron's father gave him (*Hank Aaron: Brave in Every Way.*) "Be the best you can be and keep your eyes on the goal."

I have found these culturally relevant books to be terrific for reading aloud, shared read aloud, shared reading, guided reading, literature conversations, and independent reading. As well, these books can be used to jumpstart writing as we did with the fifth graders who heard *Celia Cruz: Queen of Salsa* and then went on to write about their own dreams. (See *Teaching Essentials*, pp. 12–15.) Enjoy sharing these beautifully written and illustrated nonfiction stories with your students!

For your convenience, recommended books are listed alphabetically by title and are loosely grouped by grade level ranges, but many of these titles work well across the grades. For example, a book listed in the intermediate grades also may be suitable as a read aloud in the primary grades. More importantly, keep in mind that all the books, even those listed for the primary grades, are valuable for stimulating discussion for all levels—middle school students, high school students, and even adults.

Primary Grades (K–grade 2)

America's Champion Swimmer: Gertrude Ederle by David A. Adler. Illustrated by Terry Widener. San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 2000.

Fly High! The Story of Bessie Coleman by Louse Borden and Mary Kay Kroeger. Illustrated by Teresa Flavin. NY: Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2001.

Hank Aaron: Brave in Every Way by Peter Golenbock. Illustrated by Paul Lee. San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 2001.

Hiromi's Hands by Lynne Barasch. NY: Lee & Low Books, 2007.

Jose! Born to Dance by Susanna Reich. Illustrated by Raul Colon. NY: Simon & Schuster, 2005.

Lou Gehrig: The Luckiest Man by David A. Adler. Illustrated by Terry Widener. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1997.

Martin's Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by Doreen Rappaport. Illustrated by Bryan Collier. NY: Hyperion Books for Children, 2001.

Mighty Jackie: The Strike-Out Queen by Marissa Moss. Illustrated by C. F. Payne. NY: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2004.

Nobody Owns the Sky: The Story of "Brave Bessie" Coleman by Reeve Lindbergh. Illustrated by Pamela Papparone. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 1998.

The Pot That Juan Built by Nancy Andrews-Goebel. Illustrated by David Diaz. Lee & Low Books, 2002.

Rosa by Nikki Giovanni. Illustrated by Bryan Collier. NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2005.

The Story of Ruby Bridges by Robert Coles. Illustrated by George Ford. NY: Scholastic, Inc., 1995.

Thank You, Sarah: The Woman Who Saved Thanksgiving by Laurie Halse Anderson. Illustrated by Matt Faulkner. NY: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2002.

Intermediate Grades (grades 3–5)

Bessie Smith and the Night Riders by Sue Stauffacher. Illustrated by John Holyfield. NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2006.

Be Water, My Friend: The Early Years of Bruce Lee by Ken Mochizuki.
Illustrated by Dom Lee. NY: Lee & Low, 2006.

Brave Harriet by Marissa Moss. Illustrated by C. F. Payne. San Diego:
Harcourt, Inc., 2001.

Celia Cruz: Queen of Salsa by Veronica Chambers. Illustrated by Julie Maren.
NY: Dial Books for Young Readers, 2005.

Coming Home: From the Life of Langston Hughes by Floyd Cooper. NY:
Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers, 1994.

George Crum and the Saratoga Chip by Gaylia Taylor. Illustrated by Frank
Morrison. NY: Lee & Low Books, 2006.

Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez by Kathleen Krull. Illustrated by
Yuyi Morales. NY: Harcourt, Inc., 2003.

I Could Do That! Esther Morris Gets Women the Vote by Linda Arms White.
Illustrations by Nancy Carpenter. NY: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2005.

Jim Thorpe's Bright Path by Joseph Bruchac. Illustrated by S. D. Nelson. NY:
Lee & Low Books, 2004.

Joe Lewis: America's Fighter by David A. Adler. Illustrated by Terry Widener.
San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 2005.

Julia Morgan Built a Castle by Celeste Davidson Mannis. Illustrated by Miles
Hyman. NY: Penguin Young Readers Group, 2006

Knockin' on Wood by Lynne Barasch. NY: Lee & Low Books, 2004.

Let Them Play by Margo Theis Raven. Illustrated by Chris Ellison. Chelsea,
MI: Sleeping Bear Press, 2005.

Louis Sockalexis: Native American Baseball Pioneer by Bill Wise. Illustrated
by Bill Farnsworth. NY: Lee & Low Books, 2007.

One Thousand Tracings: Healing the Wounds of World War II by Lita Judge.
NY: Hyperion Books for Children, 2007.

Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds: The Sammy Lee Story by Paula Yoo.
Illustrated by Dom Lee. NY: Lee & Low Books, 2005.

Wilma Unlimited: How Wilma Rudolph Became the World's Fastest Woman by
Kathleen Krull. Illustrated by David Diaz, Harcourt Brace & Company,
1996.

Middle School (grades 6–8)

Maritcha: A Remarkable Nineteenth-Century American Girl by Tonya Bolden.

Henry N. Abrams, 2004.

Rabble Rousers: 20 Women Who Made a Difference by Cheryl Harness. NY:

Dutton Children's Books, 2003.

Through My Eyes: Ruby Bridges by Ruby Bridges. Photographs from

UPI/Corbis-Bettman Archives. NY: Scholastic Press, 1999.

We Are One: The Story of Bayard Rustin by Larry Dane Brimner. Honesdale,

PA: Calkins Creek/Boyd's Mills Press, 2007.

When Marion Sang: The True Recital of Marian Anderson by Pam Munoz

Ryan. Illustrated by Brian Selznick. NY: Scholastic, 2002. (Also

appropriate for grade 5.)

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