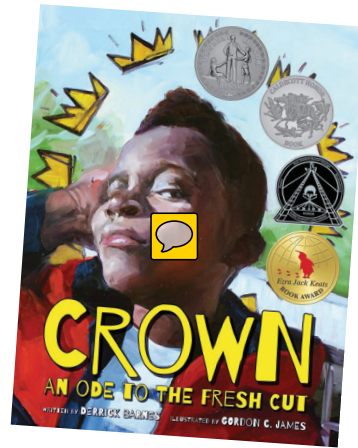


Reviewed by Cassandra Watkins

Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut

Written by Derrick Barnes
 Illustrated by Gordon C. James
 Bolden, An Agate Imprint, 2017



The royal entry: A simple, yet profound procession that sets you apart from all others. It is who you are—your swag, your signature piece. It is your crown! And as you approach that barber’s chair, you realize you are part of an awesome kingdom, a community where everyone shines in their own right.

Crown: An Ode To The Fresh Cut by Derrick Barnes, illustrated by Gordon C. James, is an intimate look at a young boy’s praise for his crowning experience at the neighborhood barbershop. The affirming role the barbershop plays in his community and life is portrayed through his eyes as he observes his own masterful African American haircut and those of the shop’s clients. There are fades, locs, cornrows, faux-hawks, shape-ups, tapered sides, and a “trim” for the ladies. Each design is representative of a remarkable community member whose hair tells the tale of, for example, a dude who is CEO of tech companies that manufacture cool, a majestic dude escorted by Black angels, and a dude whose cut is so fresh, he looks like he owns acres of land on Saturn, with a river named after him on Mars. Ultimately, this young boy’s barbershop experience is his attestation and declaration of a healthy self-esteem and love also found in his relationships within his community and at home.

Gordon C. James’ illustrations add intricate artistic details, weaving his vibrant, figurative drawings and color mastery into this story. Each character’s chair visit is revealed in the crisp lines and defined hair dress throughout the book.

The story depicts the *ode* to the crown as a celebration of the seemingly ordinary, which becomes the extraordinary through a child’s barbershop experience. An ode is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as [1] “a lyric poem in the form of an address to a particular subject, often elevated in style or manner and written in varied or irregular meter; [2] a poem meant to be sung.”

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Poetry is an integral part of the Orff Schulwerk experience. We can start with chants and rhymes that could eventually become a larger work. For example, begin with selecting meaningful vocabulary or phrases from the text. Words such as fades, locs, majestic dudes, and faux-hawks become the material for spoken-word projects accompanied by John Coltrane’s *My Favorite Things*. On the other hand, the entire book could be explored as a spoken-word performance to the tunes of Thelonious Monk or Miles Davis. Layered speech ostinati and improvisation could be developed as a performance or “informance” for a school or community audience. Students can compose and perform their own odes based on personal experiences or favorite things. Encourage them

to write a piece about that special something that brings them joy and builds their confidence.

Like the review teams of the Caldecott, Newbery, Coretta Scott King, and Ezra Jack Keats awards that have honored this book, you and your students will want to stand up and cheer for this celebration of the seemingly simple. As the book ends, “Tip that man! Tip that man! It was worth it. It always is. ... Hello world.” ■

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