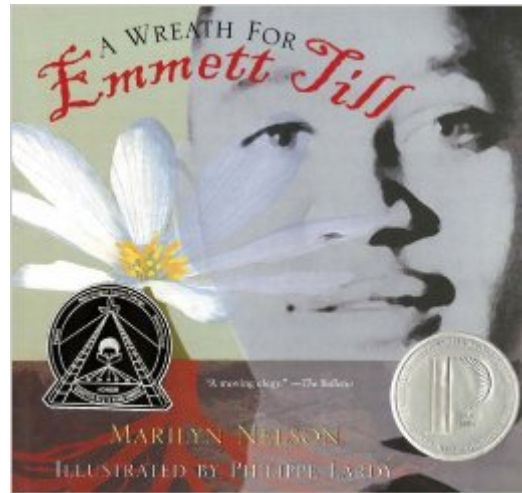


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# A Wreath For Emmett Till



## Synopsis

A Coretta Scott King and Printz honor book now in paperback. *A Wreath for Emmett Till* is "A moving elegy," says *The Bulletin*. In 1955 people all over the United States knew that Emmett Louis Till was a fourteen-year-old African American boy lynched for supposedly whistling at a white woman in Mississippi. The brutality of his murder, the open-casket funeral held by his mother, Mamie Till Mobley, and the acquittal of the men tried for the crime drew wide media attention. In a profound and chilling poem, award-winning poet Marilyn Nelson reminds us of the boy whose fate helped spark the civil rights movement.

## Book Information

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Best Sellers Rank: #53,199 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #7 in [Books > Teens > Literature & Fiction > Poetry](#) #23 in [Books > Teens > Historical Fiction > United States > 20th Century](#) #26 in [Books > Children's Books > Growing Up & Facts of Life > Difficult Discussions > Violence](#)

Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

## Customer Reviews

I cannot recall if back in 1968 my eighth-grade American history teacher Mrs. Auryansen taught us about the death of Emmett Till. But one of the things I loved most about that year of studying with an enthusiastic teacher who often made American history come alive for me was the series of quarterly independent projects we had to plan and complete. Each marking period we would have to do an American history-related visual piece as well as a written piece and an oral piece. "BY the flow of the inland river, Whence the fleets of iron have fled, Where the blades of the grave-grass quiver, Asleep are the ranks of the dead: Under the sod and the dew, Waiting the judgment-day; Under the one, the Blue, Under the other, the Gray." Whence the fleets of iron have fled, Where the blades of the grave-grass quiver, Asleep are the ranks of the dead: Under the sod and the dew, Waiting the

judgment-day; Under the one, the Blue, Under the other, the Gray." That's the first of the seven verses of "The Blue and The Gray" by Francis Miles Finch (1827-1907). I memorized and proudly recited those seven verses to my American history class, and that memory has stuck with me. Having just celebrated my personal half-century mark, I'm all for turning around and returning to eighth-grade. And if I could do so, this is what I would memorize this time around for one of my oral pieces: "Pierced by the screams of a shortened childhood, my heartwood has been scarred for fifty years by what I heard, with hundreds of green ears. That jackal laughter. Two hundred years I stood listening to small struggles to find food, to the songs of creature life, which disappears and comes again, to the music of the spheres. Two hundred years of deaths I understood. Then slaughter axed one quiet summer night, shivering the deep silence of the stars. A running boy, five men in close pursuit. One dark, five pale faces in the moonlight. Noise, silence, back-slaps. One match, five cigars. Emmett Till's name still catches in the throat." That is one of the fifteen sonnets that comprises *A WREATH FOR EMMETT TILL* by Marilyn Nelson. After reading the book to myself and then reading it aloud to Shari, my thoughts kept wandering off yesterday to brainstorming how I might somehow set up an event down in the City on Sunday, August 28th--fifty years to the day since Emmett was kidnapped--in which someone who would both have known the Civil Rights movement and whose presence could attract a major audience (a Danny Glover or a Bill Russell or someone else of that stature) would read this powerful series of poems aloud to a crowd to commemorate the anniversary of the brutal death of Emmett Till, a death which horrified the world and made clear what had gone on for so long. I can imagine having a choir and soloist perform at such an event, but definitely not a bunch of droning speakers whose verbosity might take away from the carefully chosen words of Marilyn Nelson's heroic crown of sonnets about Emmett Till. As Marilyn explains in her preface (*HOW I CAME TO WRITE THIS POEM*): "A crown of sonnets is a sequence of interlinked sonnets in which the last line of one becomes the first line, sometimes slightly altered, of the next. A heroic crown of sonnets is a sequence of fifteen interlocking sonnets, in which the last one is made up of the first lines of the preceding fourteen." Thus, it's like a literary crossword puzzle. Get one word wrong and it simply doesn't fit together. Get all the words exactly right and you've got something worthy of public performances by famous personalities and recitations by today's and tomorrow's American history students. Marilyn Nelson got it right.

*A Wreath for Emmett Till* is my first encounter with Marilyn Nelson; a bittersweet introduction. As a member of the Sisters~Nineties Literary Group, this book fascinates me as it is a beautiful example of poetic mastery. When our editor gives us a writing assignment for our publication, I grumble and

protest, then I revel in the experience; delighting in the success of learning about the world of poetry and all its various forms. The "sankofet," created by Debra Morrowloving Sisters~Nineties founder, comes to mind as I read this book.\*Ms. Nelson's rhyme scheme is a fourteen-line sonnet on each page linking the previous poem with the next as the last line of the previous poem is the first line of the next poem on the following page. In the world of poetry, this is known as a "crown of sonnets."Although written for children, I had to read the book twice to "feel" the horrible images that this book so beautifully captures. References to flower, plants, and trees are symbolic and make up the "wreath" for Emmett. Please read this book and share the experience with your children. The incident is described as the motivating force of the Civil Rights Movement. It is also a wake-up call to all those who continue to live a life of apathy and denial when it comes to standing up for the legacy of the African American struggle.\*Sankofet is a poetic form of three stanzas, each with seven lines. The fourth line of each stanza is the same. The last word of each stanza is the first word of the subsequent verse, and the last line of a Sankofet is the first line in the poem. The format of the Sankofet emulates the call-and-response motif of Afrikan musical tradition with the repetition of the fourth lines. The connecting words at the beginning and end of the stanzas represent the Afrikan cycle of life concept.

This book is in the form of a Heroic Sonnet is a brilliantly written book. It is about giving a wreath to Emmett Till, a young child who was lynched after whistling at a white woman. Till, who normally lived in Chicago, was spending the time at his uncle for the summer. After whistling at a white woman, Briant, Milan and a third person kidnapped Emmett Till. Soon after the kidapping, they lynched him. Later in the Trial, Briant and Milan were found not guilty, though later, it was proven they were guilty. This book was brilliantly written into a heroic sonnet, each of the first lines stating: R.I.P. EMMETT L. TILL. It got me emotionally connected, displeased by the racism people had back then (i.e. allowing Briant and Millan the right to be not guilty just because Till was Black). This book was brilliantly written through the use of similies. It allowed you to invision the racism back then. The only comment I have against it is the World Trade Center reference, mentioning 9/11 hadn't happened yet. Other than that, A Wreath for Emmet Till by Marilyn Nelsen was an excellent work of poetry.

The poem is beautiful and profound, and the artwork goes along with its own story to tell. The book is an excellent addition to any collection of literature that covers America's past with racial segregation. The book may be categorized as "Children's" or "young adult" literature, but adults (like

me) will find it very impressive and informative (especially since the author and artist included notes in the back of the book).

This bracing work of art, complete with illustrations depicting just enough of the story to know that it was true, will haunt me always. Written in iambic pentameter, a form familiar to students of Shakespeare, with allusions to crimes both historical and current, it teaches without preaching, making it an excellent resource and starting point for a discussion on civil rights.

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