

Nobel Prize Winners Inspire Young Readers

By guest columnist, Katie Parker, Library Media Specialist, Clinton Elementary School

“We can change the world and make it a better place. It is in our hands to make a difference.”
Nelson Mandela

What motivates people to make a difference in the world? How can one man’s personal fortune be transformed into a lasting contribution toward humanity? It is no accident that many authors have explored the lives of winners of the Nobel Prize in hopes of offering younger readers an opportunity to engage with innovative ideas and inspire them to make a positive impact on the world.

“Of Thee I Sing: A Letter To My Daughters” by Barack Obama, a collective biography published in 2010, tells the story of thirteen inspiring Americans, including three Nobel Prize winners. Obama, himself, was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2009 for his efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples. Written tenderly, as a letter to his daughters, Malia and Sasha, Barack Obama celebrates American values such as creativity, bravery, and kindness while highlighting historical figures that emulate these qualities. The brilliant illustrations provided by Loren Long, depicting each of the famous Americans as children alongside Obama’s daughters, only serves to underscore Obama’s powerful message: we are more powerful together than we are as individuals.

“Wangari’s Trees of Peace: A True Story from Africa” written and illustrated by Jeanette Winter, a picture book biography published in 2008, demonstrates to our youngest readers just how much of a difference one individual can make, starting in her own backyard. Wangari Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for efforts related to environmental sustainability. Founder of the 1977 Green Belt Movement, Maathai worked to combat deforestation by planting trees and encouraging others to do the same. Winter’s plain language provides an ideal introduction to the woman who helped define the connection between democracy and peace in order to reclaim the landscape of Kenya for the next generation.

“The House That Jane Built: A Story About Jane Addams” written by Tanya Lee Stone, a picture book biography published in 2015, provides a glimpse into her legacy of social justice in the United States. Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931 for her efforts to revive the ideal and rekindle the spirit of peace, Addams worked to help the urban poor through the establishment of a Hull-House, a Chicago settlement house dedicated to meeting the needs of a community of immigrants in ways that both valued Americanization and retention of ethnic identity. Stone’s inspiring words are only augmented by Kathryn Brown’s beautiful watercolor, combined with pen-and-ink illustrations.

“Malala’s Magic Pencil” written by Malala Yousafzai is a picture book autobiography. Published in 2017, Yousafzai focuses on her childhood in Pakistan and her desire for a magic pencil to change the world. As she grows, she realizes that may not be able to magically erase injustice, but she can still use each day to strive to make her wishes come true. Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, for her fight for the right of every child to receive an education, Malala is the youngest ever Nobel Prize winner.

“Forever Young” by Bob Dylan uses a classic picture book format to pair the singer-songwriter’s lyrics with Paul Roger’s mid-century style illustrations, creating a series of scenes about spreading kindness. Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016 for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition. Originally recorded in 1973, Dylan wrote the lyrics to “Forever Young” with his own children in mind. The advice located therein, however, is universal:

May you always be courageous
Stand upright and be strong
May you stay forever young