



Black Caucus of the American Library Association, Inc.

BCALA Literary Awards

Press Release

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For Immediate Release

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January 2023

BCALA Announces the 2023 Literary Awards Winners

The Black Caucus of the American Library Association, Inc. (BCALA) announces the winners of the 2023 BCALA Literary Awards. The awards recognize excellence in adult fiction and nonfiction by African American authors published in 2022, including an award for Best Poetry and a citation for Outstanding Contribution to Publishing. The recipients will receive awards during the 2023 American Library Association Annual Meeting in Chicago, IL.

The winner of the 1st Novelist Award is ***Black Cake: a Novel*** by Charmaine Wilkerson (Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House).

Eleanor Bennett has died, and she has left an eight-hour recording to be heard by her two grown children, in the presence of each other. Her son Byron has a successful career while Benny, her daughter, dropped out of college long ago and does not have a clear picture of what she wants to do with her life. In Eleanor's own words she is going to tell them everything that they need to know about her past to help them reclaim their once close relationship, and the connection to her traditional Caribbean ***Black Cake***, as they understand Eleanor's true history. Charmaine Wilkerson is a Caribbean-American journalist, writer, and author.

The Fiction category winner is ***Take My Hand: a Novel*** by Dolen Perkins-Valdez (Berkley, an imprint of Penguin Random House).

Take My Hand illustrates the truth of young Black women and girls victimized by medical misinformation and experimentation. Sisters Erica and India are prescribed birth control, leading to a series of escalating and irreversible interventions into their young lives. Delivered from the present-day perspective of their childhood nurse, Civil Townsend quests to finish what she started in an Alabama family planning clinic in 1973. Perkins-Valdez's intricately crafted tale of tragedy and redemption weaves back and forth in time and is inspired by true events. Dolen Perkins-Valdez lives in Washington, DC, with her family.

The Honor books for Fiction are ***Perish: a Novel*** by LaToya Watkins (Tiny Reparations Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House); ***Yonder: a Novel*** by Jabari Asim (Simon and Schuster); and ***Stories From Tenants Downstairs*** by Sidik Fofana (Scribner, an imprint Simon and Schuster).

LaToya Watkins cleverly writes an intriguing debut that spans almost five decades. It follows four members of the Turner family—Julie B., Helen Jean, Jan, and Lydia. The setting is a Texas town called Jerusalem. A family's "goodbye" reunion for their mother and grandmother brings to light some long kept secrets and forces each family member to deal with important questions about blame and forgiveness. This riveting book chronicles and focuses on the matriarch Helen Jean dark past that comes to light. LaToya Watkins lives and teaches in a suburb of Dallas.

Yonder, a gut-wrenching, fast-paced novel about slavery, love, and what an enslaved person is willing to sacrifice for freedom. The story follows several characters from the same plantation on their journey through the Underground Railroad to "yonder." This novel is filled with African spirituality and its power to sustain those who suffered the most. The magical realism seeped throughout helps to create such power in the depth of the story. ***Yonder*** is a work that breaks your heart and builds it back up again. Jabari Asim directs the MFA program in creative writing at Emerson College.

In eight interconnected stories, Sidik Fofana's ***Stories from the Tenants Downstairs*** gives the reader a look into the pressures families face from day to day. The tight-knit cast of Banneker Terrace shows how to survive in Harlem as life and the lack of money get in the way. From single motherhood to struggles with money and crime, these stories show a side Sidik Fofana wants the world to see in regard of how communities work in the age of low-income housing and gentrification looming overhead. Sidik Fofana received his MFA from NYU and is a public school teacher in Brooklyn.

The winner in the Nonfiction category is ***The Tuskegee Student Uprising: a History*** by Brian Jones (New York University Press).

The Tuskegee Student Uprising brings together research and interviews with former students, professors, and administrators. Brian Jones provides an in-depth account of one of the most dynamic student movements in United States history. The writing takes the reader through Tuskegee students' process of transformation and intellectual awakening as they stepped off campus to make unique contributions to southern movements for democracy and civil rights in the 1960s. Brian Jones is the Director of the New York Public Library's Center for Educators and Schools.

The Honor books for the Nonfiction category are ***His Name is George Floyd: One Man's Life and the Struggle for Racial Justice*** by Robert Samuels and Toluse Olorunnipa (Viking, an imprint of Penguin Random House); ***Love, Activism, and the Respectable Life of Alice Dunbar-Nelson*** by Tara T. Green (Bloomsbury Academic).

His Name is George Floyd is a multi-generational story that explores the effects of systemic racism on George Floyd's family, dating back three generations. This is a thoughtful examination of Floyd's strengths and weaknesses to invite the reader to begin to understand the composite factors that led Floyd to his heartrending end. Samuels and Olorunnipa humanize Floyd through this holistic illustration of his life. Robert Samuels, a national political reporter at *The Washington Post*, joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in March 2023. Toluse Olorunnipa is a political enterprise and investigations reporter for *The Washington Post*.

Dr. Tara T. Green managed to merge the spirit of an activist and non-conformist within the quiet appearance of respectability. Alice Dunbar-Nelson was not only the ex-wife of poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar or a Creole woman who could pass for white but didn't. She was a woman whose varied background and experiences enabled her to become a writer who left a collection of writings that made her contemporaries and those of later generations think about their outlook on life and place in the world. Dr. Green is a Black feminist community-engaged scholar, mentor, and university professor.

The winner for BCALA's Best Poetry Award is ***A Peculiar People: Poems*** by Steven Willis (Button Publishing, Inc.).

A Peculiar People by Steven Willis is a book of poems that showcases Willis' life experiences and the hardships endured. This collection of poetry voices the struggles he went through, as we all do, with his Black culture and his pain. Steven Willis was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois and received his MFA in Acting from the University of Iowa.

The Honor book for Best Poetry Award is ***Claim Ticket for Stolen People*** by Quintin Collins (Mad Creek Books, an imprint of The Ohio State University Press).

In the variety of poems in various poetic forms, Collins presents claim tickets for anger, resistance, and hope as he presents scenarios for stolen people, Africans who became enslaved, to claim what is rightfully theirs. The poems take us through the black existence, starting with a sonogram, and continuing to birth and through all the trials and tribulations encountered in life's journey. Together this collection of poems leads one on a voyage from being stolen to claiming and reclaiming our ukweli (Swahili for truth.) Quintin Collins is a writer, editor and director of the Solstice Low-Residency Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing Program.

The BCALA Literary Awards Committee presents two Outstanding Contribution to Publishing Citation Awards.

Isn't Her Grace Amazing!: the Women Who Changed Gospel Music by Cheryl Wills (Amistad, an imprint of HarperCollins).

Cheryl Wills gives honor to the ancestors with ***Isn't Her Grace Amazing! The Women Who Changed Gospel Music***. Beautifully rendered and researched, Wills' work lifts up the stories of these legendary musicians and singers as a chorus. Chapters which focus on queens, sisters, architects, crossovers, and modern artists in the gospel music world are a curriculum for new fans and an anthology for devoted listeners. Carefully curated prose and stunning photography offers readers an exhibit-like experience in a volume to linger with. Cheryl Wills is a veteran journalist with Spectrum News NYI.

Emma's Postcard Album: Black Lives in the Early Twentieth Century by Faith Mitchell (University Press of Mississippi).

Emma's Postcard Album is a glimpse of African American life through the vignettes told in the postcards mailed to Emma, the author's maternal grandmother. In Emma's Postcards we hear the voices of people whose names are only known in family stories. Despite the academic research, there is a personal connection the reader can grasp while reading Emma's Postcards whether it's the recollection of a personal experience or an oft-repeated story from a family gathering. Dr. Mitchell is a medical anthropologist and an Institute Fellow at the Urban Institute.

Members of the BCALA Literary Awards Jury are Gladys Smiley Bell (Chair), Hampton, VA; Tiffany A. Duck, Newport News, VA; Dana G. Evans, Virginia Beach VA; Ritchie A. Momon, Independence, MO; John Page, Washington, DC; Jamar Rahming, Wilmington, DE; and Deimos Webber-Bey, Forest Hills, NY.