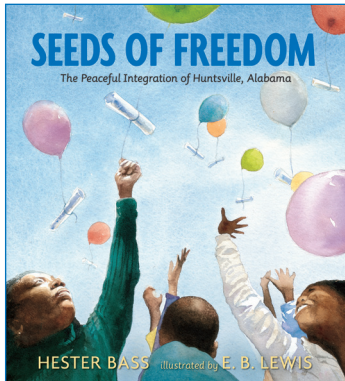


# SEEDS OF FREEDOM

The Peaceful Integration of Huntsville, Alabama

A Q&A with Author **HESTER BASS** and Illustrator **E. B. LEWIS**



**Hester, what was your inspiration for *Seeds of Freedom*? Can you tell us a bit about your personal connection to Huntsville, Alabama?**

**HESTER** My family moved to Huntsville in 2003. Three years later, I was performing author visits and noticed a historical marker in front of a Huntsville private

school relating Alabama's first case of "reverse integration." That sent me to the public library, where I discovered that the first integrated public school in Alabama was also in Huntsville and that both events occurred during the same week in September 1963. Aha! A book is born! In my many drafts, I kept returning to the metaphor that every action is a seed planted toward the accomplishment of a goal, understanding that it is often unknown what effort will be required for success until the task is complete. For integration to be peaceful in Huntsville, the African Americans had to keep trying no matter what, the white establishment had to eventually realize that their traditional society was grossly unfair, and both sides had to remain committed to nonviolence. Considering the brutality of "Bombingham" only 100 miles away, this "perfect storm of peace" in Huntsville was all the more impressive.

**E. B., what first drew you to Hester's story, and how did you begin to envision the illustrations?**

**E. B.** I was drawn to the story largely because of Hester and the way Hester writes. I've worked with her before, and I just love her writing, so I knew this was going to be an incredible book. And then with any project, I try to approach it like a detective, snooping out the hook in the story. The story's basic hook is right there in the title, *Seeds of Freedom*. Just envisioning that whole process of growth, and how sometimes within that process there are things that don't go according to plan, but in the end, it all comes together. That note was resounding. There's a part of the story when they are releasing balloons carrying pamphlets, and I thought, *There it is! There are the seeds!* That gave me the cover image, and a way of seeing the whole story. I love taking on strong human-interest stories — that's a common thread that runs through my body of work — and these are difficult stories not only to tell but also to make for children. These kids need this information, but how do you share it in a way that's going to be intriguing and exciting for them? So the image of the balloons carrying pamphlets, and the idea that the pamphlets are seeds, helped me find my way.

Little seeds going up into the air and falling down, taking root. That's how the tree grows.

**You first worked together five years ago on *The Secret World of Walter Anderson*. What has the experience been like to collaborate on your new book?**

**HESTER** It was quite different. In 2008 for *The Secret World of Walter Anderson*, E. B. and I traveled together by car from Huntsville, Alabama, to Ocean Springs, Mississippi, where I had lived for seven years. We spent a week re-creating E. B.'s thumbnail sketches, setting up each scene on location with props and models (including two of Walter Anderson's children posing as their parents), so that he could take photographs to use later as reference for his watercolor paintings. It's exceedingly rare for an author and illustrator to collaborate in this way, and it was a rewarding, memorable experience. Fast-forward to 2013, and I'm living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, when E. B. schedules his trip to Huntsville to do the reference photography for *Seeds of Freedom* on the one weekend when I simply could not get away. Sigh. Enter the wonders of modern technology and true friendship. I called upon my network of writers and librarians in Huntsville. I lined up a host who had a guest room for E. B. and could also be his driver, cheerleader, and logistics expert — thanks forever, Beck! I e-mailed research notes and photos in advance, requested introductions for E. B. to key people, and trusted that it would all go smoothly, from 1,200 miles away. It did. My friends in Huntsville are amazing, and the result of their generosity and kindness and ingenuity — plus E. B.'s skills — is this beautiful book!

**E. B.** With our first book, Hester was there with me when we went down to Ocean Springs. It's kind of a taboo having the author along with you, but as Hester says, she's the boss of the words and I'm the boss of the pictures, and it worked out just fine. So we actually worked together, going through the whole process of how I envisioned the art. For this new book, Hester was unable to come to Huntsville, but she made sure that when I got there, people would be in place for me and everything I needed would be set up: the models, main characters, people who had knowledge of the story. Hester made it possible for us to get together and work out the nuances, the details.

**What kind of research did you do for the story and the art?**

**HESTER** I studied, wrote, rewrote, and thought about this book for six years. I became a fixture at the Huntsville–Madison County Public Library, reading newspapers, magazines, and other contemporary accounts from the 1960s, as well as dozens of books written since about the civil rights movement. I

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interviewed people who lived these events, including Dr. Sonnie W. Hereford III, an octogenarian with a prodigious memory for detail. And I recalled my childhood in Georgia, where I entered first grade in 1962. I had seen black children around town, and I wondered where they went to school, because all my classmates were white. Integration came regrettably late but peacefully in fifth grade. That's why when I learned about what had happened in Huntsville, the story resonated and I was inspired to write the book.

**E. B.** My first research was reading the materials that Hester sent. She sent me a plethora of books so that I could get a sense of what that whole time was like. With these stories, I'm always digging deep. I tell my students you need to dig deep enough, so deep that you can actually smell it. That's how I approached this book, and it was like, my God, this is so much information and so much great material. And then, as with pretty much all of my books, I got on a plane or train — whatever will get me there — to find the models and the costumes, do all the legwork, and sometimes get permission from the city to do certain things that I needed. One of the illustrations in the book is a street shot, so we stopped traffic at one end of a street in Huntsville to do a whole reenactment of what the scene would have looked like. The research for me is all part of the process and necessary in getting my work to a level of completion.

## What is one surprising thing you learned about Huntsville while creating this book?

**E. B.** There's no major highway where Huntsville is located — you have to go off the beaten track to get there—and I found out that was in large part due to the attitude that George Wallace took when the people of Huntsville decided not to support his efforts to keep segregation in place. He decided to stick it to them — he pretty much took them off the map. It's fascinating how now, when you look back years later, you find out through the history why things are as they are. It's all due to something that happened years ago, and the effects are still evident.

**HESTER** It surprised me that some of the black civil rights pioneers in Huntsville — professional people who had experienced much more equality elsewhere and who could have escaped the city that denied them basic human rights — chose to stay, optimistic that they could help improve life for everyone. That takes real courage. It also surprised me that many people in Huntsville did not know this story. History is the soil in which all of us seeds are planted, and the more we know about the past, the better prepared we are for the future.

## Is there anything else you would like readers to know about *Seeds of Freedom*?

**E. B.** I have two favorite paintings in the book. One is the scene where the little girl is holding the drawn outline of her feet. I'm a child of the 1950s and had no idea that this was happening, that in some places, when people of color were buying a new pair of shoes, they had to go with a tracing of their feet because they were unable to try them on. The other is the scene where I envisioned what the Birmingham riots were like: the anxiety, the high tension, the chaos. . . . Something that is noticeable in my work is the use of color to convey mood. And so the riot scene is indicative of how I use color and energy to put the tension in. You'll see a spark of red and blue in there — that is done on purpose. They stand out in contrast to the muted colors.

Also, about the book overall, one of the old adages is that if you don't recognize your history, you're doomed to repeat it. This book is a great way to learn the history — not only how we got to this place, but also how far we have to go.

**HESTER** It must be hard for young people today to comprehend what segregation was like, to imagine a time in America when you could not enter the library or swim in the pool, solely because of the color of your skin. This was a difficult period in history, and I hope this book stands as a reminder that the ferocious violence in some places was countered in others by peaceful resistance and, ultimately, cooperation. At its core, *Seeds of Freedom* is about making good choices. Resolving conflict through peaceful means is not a talent everyone is born with; it's a skill that requires training and practice. Life is basically a series of choices, and stories can be a way to rehearse making decisions, to understand that every choice has a consequence. I was deeply impressed by the choices made by the people of Huntsville, both black and white, to face the struggle for change with a positive outlook and a firm commitment to nonviolence. This book is dedicated to them, and to all those who seek freedom and justice through peace.



**HESTER BASS** is the author of the picture-book biography *The Secret World of Walter Anderson*, which won an Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children,

as well as the picture book *So Many Houses*, illustrated by Alik Arzoumanian. She lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.



**E. B. LEWIS** is the illustrator of more than thirty books for children, including *The Secret World of Walter Anderson*, also by Hester Bass.

Among his many honors are a Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award for *Talkin' About Bessie: The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman* by Nikki Grimes, as well as four Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honors. He lives in Folsom, New Jersey.