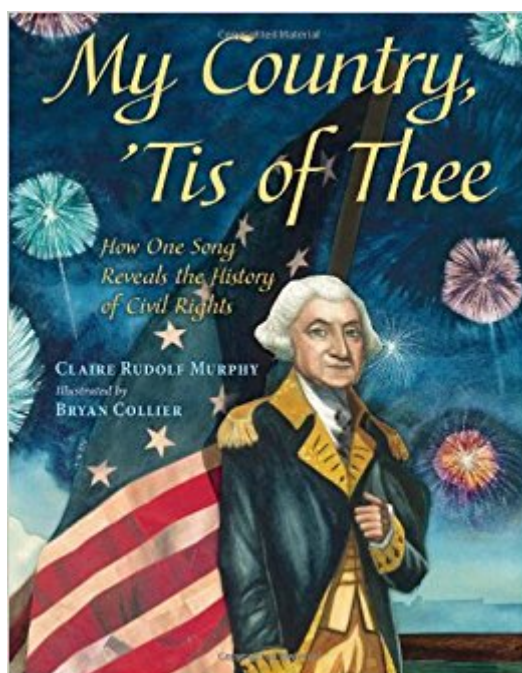


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My Country, 'Tis Of Thee: How One Song Reveals The History Of Civil Rights



Synopsis

More than any other, one song traces America's history of patriotism and protest. Everyone knows the words to "My Country, 'Tis of Thee." What most don't realize is that this iconic song has been a beacon of change for hundreds of years. Generations of protesters and civil rights pioneers have created new lyrics, beginning in royalist Britain and continuing through conflicts in colonial times, the American Revolution, the suffragist and labor movements, and the struggles for black and Native American civil rights. With spectacular illustrations by Caldecott Honor-winning artist Bryan Collier, *My Country, 'Tis of Thee* offers a fascinating insight into the American fight for freedom.

Book Information

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Age Range: 5 - 9 years

Grade Level: Kindergarten - 4

Customer Reviews

Gr 5-7 • A familiar patriotic song culminates in a hymn to "Great God Our King," having long ago originated as a tribute to England's King George II. Through two centuries, many different texts were used by groups for whom freedom didn't ring. Murphy's subtitle introduces this collection of variants. The chronological string of historical points begins in 18th-century England and moves through protests of the colonists, the Revolutionary War, and subsequent lack of freedoms and full citizenship for women, slaves, Native Americans, and people of color until well after the Civil War. Double-page entries include a short bit of history and a related verse of a protest

song set against Collier's watercolor and collage scenes and portraits of individuals and groups. The view is most often somber, with dark and neutral tones occasionally brightened with a bit of deep blue. The presentation culminates with Marian Anderson's 1939 Lincoln Memorial performance upon being shut out of Constitution Hall, the rise of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Aretha Franklin's singing at the inauguration of Barack Obama. Finally, readers are invited to "Write a new verse for a cause you believe in. Help freedom ring." The invitation is laudable, and some of the songs are clear and compelling. Others seem quaint or even murky for a young audience: "Let Freedom's voice prevail,/And draw aside the veil,/Supreme Effulgence hail,/Sweet Liberty." The book concludes with brief notes about each entry and the music and verses of "My Country 'Tis of Thee." The sketchy outline of civil rights history could serve as an introduction for some readers or classrooms. Creative music teachers might also use it to explore the larger realm of protest songs.

—Margaret Bush, Simmons College, Boston

This unusual picture book traces the history of the song that is usually referred to by its first line, My country, 'Tis of thee (the song's true title is America). Murphy suggests that the changes made to the lyrics in different periods create a narrative of civil rights in America. Originally an English song from the 1740s (God Save the King), it inspired new, more revolutionary verses as colonial America moved toward independence. Later, activists adapted the song to promote a variety of causes, including the abolition of slavery, voting rights for women, workers' rights, and civil rights for African Americans. The text creates a sweeping sense of history, culminating with Aretha Franklin singing America at President Obama's inauguration and urging children to write a new verse for a cause you believe in. Collier's atmospheric collages of paintings and photos create richly textured effects as well as some iconic portraits, while the settings and dress in the artwork will help readers envision the swift shifts from one period to the next. An intriguing new take on a beloved patriotic song. Grades 3-5. --Carolyn Phelan

Fascinating look at the history of this song and its lyrics. Author deftly weaves it through history and the role this rousing tune has played throughout our country's history. A MUST-HAVE for teachers (I used this one in a high school government class, but would be great for all ages), libraries, and your home collection. Also a great gift for adults who remember its use in the Civil Rights Movement. This book is a valuable addition to children's literature.

Excellent book, kids loved it

A very engaging book that helps on realize the parallels with civil rights movements.

It doesn't matter how long you've worked as a children's librarian. It doesn't matter how many books for kids you've read or how much of your life is dedicated to bringing them to the reading public. What I love so much about my profession is the fact that I can always be surprised. Take *My Country, 'Tis of Thee* by Claire Rudolf Murphy as a prime example. I admit that when I glanced at the cover I wasn't exactly enthralled. After all, this isn't exactly the first book to give background information on a patriotic song or poem. We've seen a slate of books talking about "We Shall Overcome" over the years (one by Debby Levy and one by Stuart Stotts) as well as books on the Pledge of Allegiance or "The New Colossus". So when I read the title of this book I admit suppressing a bit of an inward groan. Another one? Haven't we seen enough of these? Well, no. Turns out we haven't seen enough of them. Or, to be more precise, we haven't seen enough good ones. What Murphy manages to do here is tie-in a seemingly familiar song to not just the history of America but to the embodiment of Civil Rights in this country itself. So expertly woven together it'll make your eyes spin, Murphy brings us a meticulously researched, brilliant work of nonfiction elegance. Want to know how to write a picture book work of factual fascinating information for kids? Behold the blueprint right before your eyes. The press for this book says, "More than any other, one song traces America's history of patriotism and protest. More than you ever knew. Originally penned in 1740 as "God Save the King", the tune was sung by supporters of King George II. It soon proved, however, to be an infinitely flexible kind of song. Bonnie Prince Charlie's followers sang it in Scotland to new verses and it traveled to America during the French and Indian War. There the colonists began to use it in different ways. The preacher George Whitefield rewrote it to celebrate equality amongst all, the revolutionary colonists to fight the power, the loyalists to celebrate their king, and even a woman in 1795 published a protest verse for women using the song. In each instance of the song's use, author Claire Rudolf Murphy shows the context of that use and then writes out some of the new verses. Before our eyes it's adapted to the Northern and Southern causes during The Civil War. It aids labor activists fighting for better pay. Women, Native Americans, and African-Americans adopt it, each to their own cause until, ultimately, we end

with Barack Obama as president. Backmatter includes copious Source Notes documenting each instance of the song, as well as a Bibliography and Further Resources that are split between "If You Want to Learn More" and "Musical Links". There is also sheet music for the song and the lyrics of the four stanzas as we know them today. There's always a bit of a thrill in being an adult reading information about history for the first time in a work for kids. I confess readily that I learned a TON from this book. But beyond that, it was the scope of the book that really captured my heart. That it equates patriotism with protest in the same breath is a wonderful move in and of itself. However, part of what I like so much about the book is that it is clear that our work is nowhere close to done. Here is how the book ends: "Now it's your turn. Write a new verse for a cause you believe in. Help freedom ring. Right there Murphy is making it clear that for all that the Obama inauguration makes for a brilliant caper to her story, it's not the END of the story. People are still fighting for their rights. There are still causes out there worth protesting. Smart teachers, I hope, will brainstorm with their students the problems still facing equal opportunities in America today and will use this book to give kids a chance to voice their own opinions. There's a trend in nonfiction for kids right now that you'll usually find in science picture books. When it comes to selling books to children, it can be awfully frustrating for an author to have limit their work to a very precise age range or reading level since, inevitably, your readership ages out of your book fairly quickly. The solution? Two types of text in the same book. The author will write a simple sentence on a page and then pair that with a dense paragraph of facts on the other. The advantage of this is that now the book reads aloud well to younger ages while still carrying information for the older kids. Or, put another way, children studying a subject can now get more information out of a single book if they're interested and can disregard that same information if they're not. I mention this because the layout of this book looks at first like that's what Murphy was going for. You'll have the factual information, followed by the new verses of the song. Then, at the end, in larger type will be a simple sentence. Yet as I read the book it became clear that what Murphy is actually doing is using the large type sentences to draw connections from one page to another. For example, on the page about women marching for the right to vote, the section ends with the large type sentence, "But the privilege to vote didn't extend to Native Americans, male or female" (a fact that, I am ashamed to say, I did not know). Turn the page and now we're reading about the Native American struggles for Civil Rights and after

reading the factual information the bolded sentence reads, “Equality did not exist for everyone in America.” Turn the page and there’s Marion Anderson. And it is at this point that Murphy draws her most brilliant connections between the pages. Marion Anderson leads to Martin Luther King listening to her Lincoln Memorial performance on the radio when he is ten, then we turn the page to King proclaiming “My country, ‘Tis of thee” in his “I have a dream” speech, which then naturally ties into Aretha Franklin singing the song at the inauguration of Barack Obama. Amazing. Now we’ve a funny relationship to the art of Bryan Collier. Sometimes I feel like he gives a book his all and comes out swinging as a result. If you’ve ever seen his work on Uptown or Knock Knock or Martin’s Big Words or Dave the Potter then you know what he’s capable of. By the same token, for every Uptown there’s a Lincoln and Douglass where it just doesn’t have that good old-fashioned Collier magic. I worried that maybe My Country, ‘Tis of Thee would fall into that category, particularly after seeing the anemic George Washington awkwardly placed on the book’s cover. As it turns out, that’s probably the weakest image in the book. Go into it and you’ll see that Collier is in fine fettle for the most part. For example, in a section discussing how both the North and the South adopted this song and sang their own verses to it, Collier brilliantly overlays a soldier’s tent against a plantation background. Inside the tent are shots of the battle raging, letters from the soldiers spilling out over the sides like a fabric of their own. Turn the page and now the fields are bare, the Emancipation Proclamation having been declared, and the papers you see floating across the earth and into the sky all begin with “A Proclamation.” This is the kind of attention to detail that gets completely ignored in a work of nonfiction, even when the artist has taken a great deal of care and attention. It took me about five or six reads before I would notice the photographs of kids interspersed with the drawn people. And sure there’s the occasional misstep (the tea dumped by the Bostonians looks a bit more like the wings of birds than something you’d like to consume, and while Collier nails Aretha Franklin better than anyone I’ve ever seen he just can NOT get George Washington quite right) on the whole the book hangs together as well as it does because Collier knows what he’s doing. I can already tell you that this book will not get the attention it deserves. And what it deserves is a place in every single classroom, library, and bookstore shelf in the nation. Yet this isn’t a work of children’s nonfiction that slots neatly into a pre-made hole. There’s nothing else really like this book out there. That it works as

a brilliant piece of nonfiction as well as a smart as all get out piece of history and classroom ideas for teachers is clear. What it has to say about our country and our people and how they've fought for their rights should not, under any circumstances, be missed. It's hard to write patriotic American fare for kids that doesn't just sound like boosterism. This book manages to pull it off and you feel pretty good after it does. Do not miss it. Don't. For ages 7-12.

The art in this book is unforgettable. Bryan Collier's signature style turns this book into a work of art. This is why we need a sixth star. Printing stanzas and verses from history, along with their historical context, with remarkable portraits and illustrations, this book gives a history of the hymn as well as the struggle for America to live up to her highest ideals. Tells such a beautiful story, you will be humming and singing and filled with joy. Let freedom ring! The book concludes with the printed music, four printed stanzas, and two excellent pages of source notes. This book could not have been done better. I highly recommend you buy a copy for your family, and one for your favorite teacher's classroom bookshelf.

If I have learned anything as a teacher and an author, it's to have a unique way of presenting information. Claire Rudolph Murphy does exactly this in her picture book, *My Country Tis of Thee*. This nonfiction text tells not just the story of the beloved song of that name but of many groups who embraced the song and their unique rendition of the song. The illustrations by Brian Collier are also more creative than is common fare for nonfiction. Publication of *My Country Tis of Thee* has even been followed up with an original promotion. Murphy starts off by telling readers that more than any other, *My Country Tis of Thee* traces American history of patriotism and protest. Next she takes a step backwards to inform readers that this famous American song actually first appeared in England in the 1700s to support the king of the time. After that, British colonial soldiers sang the song to celebrate victories in the French and Indian War. Not long after this, however, the song became a part of American history. So far, this might sound like a typical nonfiction text. However, Murphy then proceeds to explain that while in 1776 the United States declared its independence, not everyone was equally free. Women were not free to vote, to own property, or to make important decisions about their children's lives. America also did not represent freedom for the four million slaves in the South. These are the groups with which we are most familiar, but Murphy is not yet done. You see labor activists believed that equal rights meant better working conditions, higher pay, an eight-hour workday, and an end to

child labor. Moreover, the privilege to vote in 1920 did not extend to Native Americans. Murphy does an excellent job in referencing a wide variety of groups. I also appreciate that she includes a sample of the verse or poem of My Country 'Tis of Thee which were written to address various social issues. At the end of her overview of the history of this famous patriotic song, Murphy issues a challenge to readers: "Now it's your turn. Write a new verse for a cause you believe in." This challenge even became part a promotion of Murphy's informative picture book. So far, I have not yet found a deadline for The My Country 'Tis of Thee Music Project, which invites students, choirs, classes and clubs to submit new lyrics and performance recordings to the tune of "My Country 'Tis of Thee". However, even if the official contest is over, I could see teachers issuing a similar local challenge. As I noted at the start, other features of My Country 'Tis of Thee also stand out. For example, Collier's watercolor, collage scenes, and portraits are intricately detailed. Befitting the somber topic, the visuals are often somber, with dark and neutral tones. Just as appropriate, however, the atmospheric illustrations are brightened by blues. In addition, the settings and apparel in the artwork will help readers envision the shifts from one period to another. One last feature must be noted before I end my review and that is the end content. Murphy includes a Source Notes for every page. She lists seven books as part of her bibliography. For those who want to learn more, and you very well might for Murphy gives only a glimpse into our patriotic songs, she suggests nine additional sources. Last, on her website, one can find musical performances of all the protest verses. My Country 'Tis of Thee is a true work of craftsmanship.

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