

# A WREATH FOR Emmett Till

MARILYN NELSON

ILLUSTRATED BY PHILIPPE LARDY

## About the Book

*A Wreath for Emmett Till* is a sophisticated and thought-provoking poem written by Connecticut's poet laureate and award-winning poet Marilyn Nelson. This book combines emotion, history, and social commentary to bring the life and death of Emmett Louis Till back to our nation's consciousness. Emmett Till was a fourteen-year-old African American boy murdered in 1955 in Mississippi for allegedly whistling at or speaking to a white woman. Though two men were tried for the crime, they were acquitted; no one has been convicted for Emmett's murder. In 2004 the U.S. Justice Department reopened the case based on new evidence brought to light by two documentary films.

With beautiful language that turns chilling at times, Nelson asks readers to face the atrocity of lynching and its role in our nation's history. Her poem calls readers to bear witness and speak out against such hatred and violence. *A Wreath for Emmett Till* invites readers to explore its layers for meaning, symbolism, and connections between past, present, and future. This powerful work lends itself to group discussion, individual study, teaching extensions and activities, and further research.

## Before Reading

To prepare students for the serious and disturbing themes in *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, have them gather and share information about the history and events contained in the poem. Divide the class into groups and assign them one of the following topics to research: Jim Crow laws, lynching, Emmett Till.

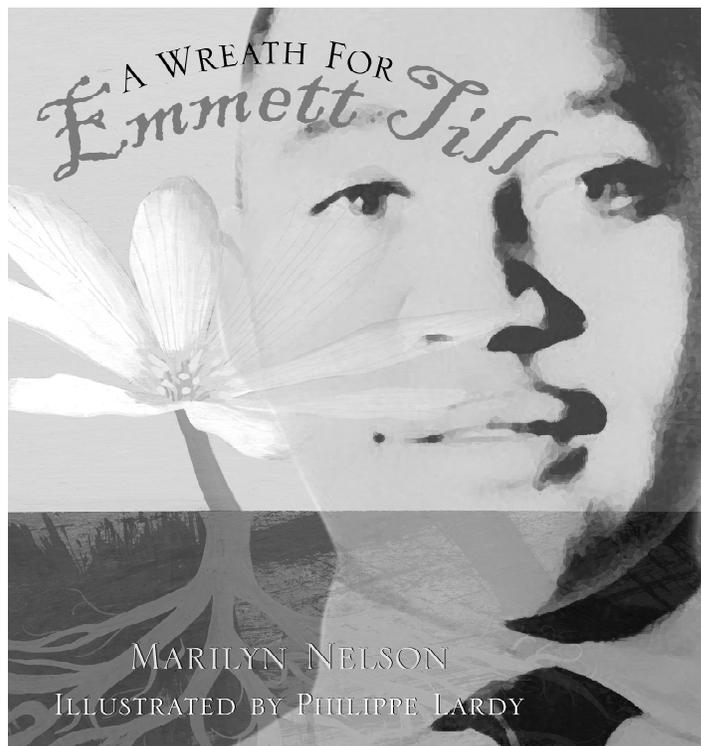
Have the groups report back to the class on the five most important pieces of information they find about their topic.

Have students read Nelson's introduction, "How I Came to Write This Poem." What do they think she means when she says "the strict form became a kind of insulation"? How does Nelson's explanation of her approach to writing the poem make students feel about reading it?

## After Reading

Questions for group discussion:

How did this poem make you feel? Have students identify lines or words that stood out for them and explain why these selections were meaningful. Nelson explains why she used the heroic



crown of sonnets form. How did this form of poetry affect students as readers? What was it like to read this form?

Who is the narrator of the poem? The narrator's voice changes in the third stanza. Who is the speaker in this stanza and how do you know? Why do you think the voice changes here?

What is the significance of the parallel universe in Stanza VI? What is the meaning of the last two lines? The word *terrorists* appears in this stanza. Do you think Till's killers were terrorists? Why or why not?

Who is the blind girl in Stanza VIII? How does she relate to Emmett Till?

How does this poem relate the past to the present and future? Which lines in the poem support these connections? Is it important to know about what happened in the past? Why or why not?

What is the overall message of this poem? Is it ultimately about hope, despair, or something else? Ask students to back up their ideas with lines or words from the poem.

Is this poem controversial? Why or why not? In the spring of 2004, Marilyn Nelson and other poets were invited to a poetry day at the White House. However, the event was canceled, reportedly due to concerns that it would become a forum for protest against the war in Iraq. How do students interpret *A Wreath for Emmett Till* as a comment on current events? What sections, lines, or words in the poem support their interpretations?

What is the meaning of the title, *A Wreath for Emmett Till*? Discuss the symbolism of flowers and plants in the poem and its illustrations.

After students have read and discussed *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, have them listen to Marilyn Nelson's reading of it. How was listening to the poem different from reading it? Did their understanding of any part of the poem change after hearing the poet read? To listen go to: [www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com](http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com)

Philippe Lardy provided editorial illustration for the poem. What is editorial illustration? How is it different from narrative or standard picture book illustration? Ask students to study the illustrations. How does the art affect them as they turn the pages? How do the colors, shapes, and images contribute to the tone and moods of the poem?

## Extension Activities

- 1. Music.** Stanza II mentions "strange fruit." Introduce students to the lyrics of "Strange Fruit," written by Abel Meeropol, which was recorded as a song in 1939 by Billie Holiday. Students can write a brief paper comparing and contrasting the song with *A Wreath for Emmett Till*.
- 2. Poetry.** There is a long history of poets using their craft to draw attention to social problems or to protest local or national events. Have students write poems to express their opinions, thoughts, and feelings about a current social situation.
- 3. History.** Engage students in a research project about the trial of Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam, the men arrested for kidnapping and killing Emmett Till. (See resources section.) What were the conditions of the trial? Do students feel that justice was served? Ask students to send a letter to one person involved in the trial. The student should express his or her opinion on that person's role in the trial.
- 4. History.** Stanzas IV and V and the corresponding endnotes refer to Emmett's mother, Mamie Till Mobley. Students can use the Web sites in the resources section to find out more about Mamie Till Mobley's decisions and actions after her son's death. Provide students with the opportunity to respond to her courage through writing or art.
- 5. Current Events.** At the time of this book's publication, no one had been convicted of Emmett Till's murder. However, in 2004 the U.S. Department of Justice reopened the case based on new information presented in two documentaries about Emmett Till. Have students find out more about the Department of Justice's announcement and then write letters to the editor of the local newspaper making the case for why or why not this matter should be pursued so many years later.
- 6. Activism.** Students can research to learn what social conditions existed that allowed Emmett Till to be murdered in 1955. Ask students to reflect on their own time and place, then ask them to write essays about whether and why Emmett Till's murder could happen today. Ask them to reread and reflect on Stanza XIV and to include in their essays their ideas on what they can do to prevent or stop hate and racism.

**7. Writing.** Have students write an obituary for Emmett Till. What is important for people to know and remember about him and his fate?

**8. Personal Connections.** Ask students to think back to before they read *A Wreath for Emmett Till*. Have students write about the most important things they've learned from reading this poem. What aspects of Emmett Till's story will stay with them for the next fifty years?

## Resources

Note: Many of these resources contain graphic descriptions or pictures of racism and/or lynchings.

### Web sites:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/>

This Web site accompanies the PBS documentary *The Murder of Emmett Till* and provides teaching resources.

<http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/home.htm> and

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/>

Companion Web sites for the video and PBS series *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow* offering resources and teaching ideas.

### Books:

Crowe, Chris. *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case*. Dial, 2003.

Crowe, Chris. *Mississippi Trial, 1955*. Dial, 2002.

Till Mobley, Mamie, and Christopher Benson. *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America*. Random House, 2003.

### Videos:

*The Murder of Emmett Till*, produced by Stanley Nelson. PBS Home Video, 2003.

*The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*, produced by Bill Jersey and William R. Grant. California Newsreel, 2002.

## About the Author

Marilyn Nelson is the author of *Carver: A Life in Poems*, which won the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, the Flora Stieglitz Straus Award, a Newbery Honor Award, and a Coretta Scott King Honor Award. Her poetry collection *The Fields of Praise* won the 1998 Poet's Prize and was a finalist for the 1997 National Book Award, the PEN Winship Award, and the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize. Nelson, a professor of English at the University of Connecticut, lives in Storrs, Connecticut.

## About the Illustrator

Philippe Lardy is an award-winning illustrator whose work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Rolling Stone*, *The New Yorker*, and the *Boston Globe*. Lardy lives in Paris and exhibits his work in the United States and Europe.