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A wreath for Emmett Till

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Nelson, Marilyn. *A Wreath for Emmett Till*. Illustrated by Philippe Lardy. Houghton Mifflin, 2005. ISBN 0618397523. \$17.00. 48 pp.

Reviewer: Marsha D. Broadway

Reading Level: Young adult

Rating: Outstanding

Genre: Historical poetry;

Subject: Till, Emmett, 1941-1955--Juvenile poetry; African Americans--Crimes against--Juvenile poetry; Hate crimes--Juvenile poetry;

With breath-catching verse, Nelson offers a memorial to the fourteen-year-old African American boy, Emmett Till, who was beaten, shot, lynched, and thrown into a river in rural Mississippi by five white men. His offense was supposedly whistling at a white woman. The year was 1955.

Nelson employs a rare poetic form, a heroic crown of fifteen sonnets in which the last line of one poem becomes the first line of the next and the last poem is the first line of the previous fourteen poems. The heroic crown creates piercing and haunting images of a horrific hate crime and of a childhood cut short. The wreath of poems is woven with elements of nature and alludes to literary and historical events. Illustrations reflect both the natural elements and the horror of the text. Lardy used three color palettes: reds for the crime, browns for the mourning, and yellows and oranges for hope, interspersing a calming green. Both poem and illustrations are filled with symbolism and allusions, and both poet and illustrator provide notes to extend the learning experience for the reader. The poetry is exquisite, and the book provides impetus for sober discussions. References include the PBS website that is the companion to its film, *The Murder of Emmett Till*, YA author Crowe's *Getting Away with Murder* (Dial, 2003), and Till-Mobley and Benson's *Death of Innocence* (Random House, 2003). Viewing or reading any of these sources prior to reading the poetry will greatly increase the young adult's ability to understand and to absorb this dreadful event. Although the picture book format may suggest that this book is for young children, the poetry is definitely for young adults and adults.