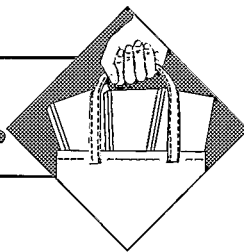


# THE BOOK BAG



## *Stumptown Kid*

by Sharron L. McElmeel

The book *Stumptown Kid*, by Carol Gorman and Ron J. Findley, has been called a “winning mix of sports, suspense, and heroism.” I would add that it is also a book of friendship, loyalty, and how one person can help a community face its racial divisiveness.

It is the early 1950s in Holden, Iowa. Charlie Nebraska, a 12-year-old whose father has been killed in the Korean War, is eager to earn a spot on the Wildcats baseball team. But Charlie does not make the team and is relegated to joining a fledging neighborhood team. Luther Peale,

a former Negro League player, has come to town and has set up camp by the river. Luther watches the boys’ games and soon he and Charlie become friends, and Luther agrees to coach Charlie’s team for a game against the Wildcats. Charlie’s mother has a male friend that does not

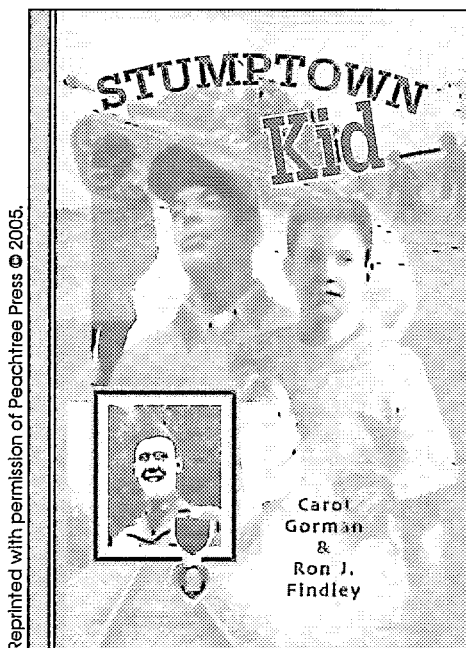
like Luther visiting the family and, like many of the other white residents of Holden, he is suspicious of Luther’s presence in the small Midwestern town.

Adding to the mix, Luther harbors a secret—he has come to the Midwest to avoid his hometown’s reaction to the fact that one of his pitches accidentally killed a white man. The racial tension present in the 1950s makes

Luther’s flight from his southern home a matter of life and death. But will his secret follow him to Holden? And if it does, will Luther’s life be in danger?

### The Origin of *Stumptown Kid*

Action, mystery, and a touch of history—I’m always looking for those elements, and this year I found *Stumptown Kid* by popular author Carol Gorman and newcomer Ron J. Findley. It seems that Findley was very involved in town team baseball leagues as a young man. One year he faced a pitcher who had a history—a history of having hit two men in the head. Those pitches accidentally killed each of the men. With that bit of a story, another story began to develop—the story that was to become *Stumptown Kid*.



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### Thematic Connections

- Baseball
- Negro League Baseball
- Life in the 1950s
- Emmett Till
- Racial Prejudice
- Integration
- Civil Rights Movement
- Friendship
- Mystery/Suspense

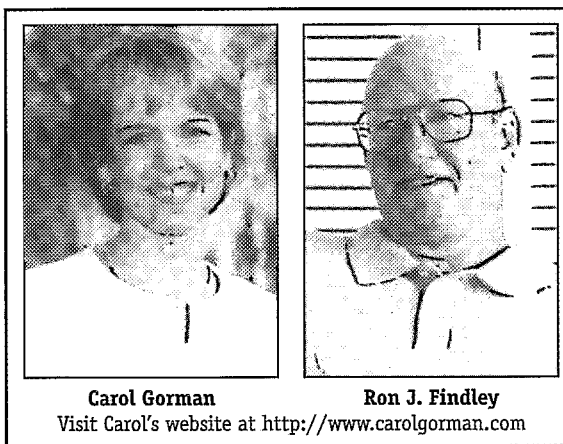
Sharron L. McElmeel is director of McBookwords (<http://www.mcbookwords.com>), online instructor for the University of Wisconsin-Stout (<http://www.uwstout.com/soe/profdev/>), and author of several books about authors and illustrators including *Authors in the Kitchen: Recipes, Stories, and More* (Libraries Unlimited, 2005). URL: <http://www.mcelmeel.com>

## Setting the Stage: Reading about Emmett Till

Chris Crowe wrote two books about the Emmett Till case. The first, a book of fiction called *Mississippi Trial, 1955*, came about after several months of reading everything he could locate about the Till case. The information he found provided the details for his fiction title and also the photographs and facts for his nonfiction title, *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case*.

Marilyn Nelson's poetic tribute to Till, *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, is a heroic crown of sonnets. The final sonnet in her work is an acrostic; the first letter of each of the lines spell out the phrase, "RIP Emmett L. Till." For more about the poetry form Nelson used, go to *Teaching Poetry and Emmett Till* (<http://www.englishjournal.colostate.edu/emmettill.htm>). This page provides an introduction and link to the *TeachingBooks.net* pages about *A Wreath for Emmett Till*. A study guide to accompany Nelson's book is available on the Houghton Mifflin website ([http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers\\_guides/nelson\\_wreath.shtml](http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers_guides/nelson_wreath.shtml)). That page has links to a site explaining the Jim Crow laws as well as to a Public Broadcast System (PBS) site about the Emmett Till case.

Findley met other individuals wherever he lived, with bits and pieces of life that he added to the story. The story swirled around in his head for twenty years or more. Its basic pieces emerged on paper as Carol Gorman took Findley's bits and pieces and developed the characters and honed the plot.



*Stumptown Kid* brings many opportunities to stimulate readers' curiosity and engage the reader in history. Racial tension was definitely part of the culture of the South; the tension was also present in the Midwest. To understand the depth of the tension in the 1950s, a reader might turn to the story of Emmett Till.

Chris Crowe begins his book about Till, *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case*, with a startling piece of history: "In August 1955, a group of white men murdered a fourteen-year-old Black boy in the Mississippi Delta." Books about the Till case will help intermediate and young adult readers understand the climate of prejudice that forced Luther to leave his home town and travel north. If a black boy could be murdered for whistling at a white woman, what would become of a black

man who killed a white man?

Luther Peale's experience in Negro League Baseball became an integral element in the book. Many great ballplayers were part of the Negro Leagues. In April 1947, Jackie Robinson was plucked from the Kansas City Monarchs and signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Just as the

White major leagues were integrating, the Negro Leagues were diminishing. Many say that integration ended the Negro Leagues.

Although Findley could provide the play-by-play narratives for the baseball scenes, neither author knew a lot about the Negro Leagues.

But as luck would have it, their hometown of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, was also home to a Negro League great, Art Pennington (also known as "Superman").

Gorman and Findley interviewed Pennington, who told them of the traveling days and how the players were not allowed into hotels. The players slept in the homes of other Blacks in the towns where they played. If there was not room in homes, they slept on the floors of Black schools or churches. Many of the details shared by Pennington ended up in *Stumptown Kid*.

Luther Peale's baseball days were toward the end of the heyday of the Negro Leagues when other events were bringing about efforts to gain civil rights. By 1955, three years after the events depicted in *Stumptown Kid*, the Emmett Till murder had caused Blacks to take more action. But the men put on trial

for Till's murder were acquitted in September 1955. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Crowe's book, *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case*, makes the connection between these two events. The Montgomery Bus Boycott lasted for more than a year. The Civil Rights Movement had officially begun, but almost a decade passed before the first Civil Rights Act was signed into law.

## Civil Rights Movement

The Civil Rights Movement brought about many incidents. Deborah Wiles writes of the day the city pools were ordered integrated in a small southern town. She was there when it happened, and the fictionalized story is told in the picture book *Freedom Summer*. The events of *Freedom Summer* took place in 1964, a year after a Birmingham church was bombed. The bombing played a major part in Christopher Paul Curtis's novel, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham: 1963*. Both of these incidents were part of the struggle for civil rights—the result of reactions to the horrific events of the 1950s.

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 Curtis, Christopher Paul. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham: 1963*. Delacorte, 1995.

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 Weatherford, Carole Boston. *A Negro League Scrapbook*. Foreword by Buck O'Neil. Boyds Mills Press, 2005.  
 Wiles, Deborah. *Freedom Summer*. Illus. by Jerome Lagarrigue. Atheneum, 2001.  
 Withers, Ernest C. *Negro League Baseball*. Photographs by Ernest C. Withers, essay by Daniel Wolff, introduction by Willie Mays, interview by Bill Chapman. Harry N. Abrams, 2004.

### Internet Sites

*American Experience: The Murder of Emmett Till*. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/>  
*Black Baseball's Negro Baseball Leagues*.

<http://www.blackbaseball.com/>  
*Carol Gorman's Web Site*. <http://www.carolgorman.com>  
*The History of Jim Crow*. <http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/>  
*Negro Baseball Leagues (a unit developed by Annette Lamb)*. <http://annettelamb.com/42explore/blkleag.htm>  
*Negro League Baseball Museum*. <http://www.nlbm.com>  
*Negro League Baseball.com—The Online Home of Negro League History*. <http://www.negroleaguebaseball.com/>  
*Teacher's Guide for A Wreath for Emmett Till published by Houghton Mifflin*. [http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers\\_guides/nelson\\_wreath.shtml](http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers_guides/nelson_wreath.shtml)  
*Teaching Poetry and Emmett Till*. <http://www.englishjournal.colostate.edu/emmettill.htm>☞

## Research: Negro Baseball Leagues

Accessible resources about the Negro League include Ernest C. Withers's photo-filled book, *Negro League Baseball*. Pictures and brief captions characterize Carole Boston Weatherford's *A Negro League Scrapbook*, a 48-page picture book that appeals to all ages.

Several websites provide history, biographical profiles of former players, and team histories.

*Negro League Baseball.com—The Online Home of Negro League History*. <http://www.negroleaguebaseball.com/>  
*Black Baseball's Negro Baseball Leagues*. <http://www.blackbaseball.com/>  
*Negro League Baseball Museum*. <http://www.nlbm.com>  
*Negro League Baseball Players Association*. <http://www.nlbpa.com/history.html>  
 A fantastic exploratory unit on

Negro Baseball Leagues has been developed by Annette Lamb (<http://annettelamb.com/42explore/blkleag.htm>).

### Showcase Your Research:

- Make a list of "10 Things I Know" about Negro League Baseball.
- Choose a well-known player from the Negro League and create a baseball card featuring him.
- Write a newspaper article about a Negro League Baseball great.
- Write an article about this year's inductees into the Milwaukee Brewer's Wall of Fame honoring Negro League Baseball greats, or choose an individual and write a profile of that specific player.
- Create an advertisement for an actual baseball game that was played between two Negro League Baseball teams.