

Pauli Murray

News and Reviews

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Fascinating figures

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Nov 16, 2022 | Filed in [Newsletters](#)

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These five absorbing YA biographies introduce readers to an iconic Olympics activist; a groundbreaking civil rights activist; a German Jewish artist; a suspected Lincoln assassination conspirator — and present well-known lives (e.g., Einstein's) in eye-catching ways.

***Pauli Murray: The Life of a Pioneering Feminist and Civil Rights Activist***

by Rosita Stevens-Holsey and Terry Catasús Jennings

High School Yellow Jacket 288 pp. g

2/22 978-1-4998-1251-0 \$18.99

e-book ed. 978-1-4998-1252-7 \$9.99

The remarkable life of Black activist, attorney, and Episcopal priest Pauli Murray (1910–1985) is presented in an engaging, extensively documented nonfiction account in verse. Drawing heavily on Murray’s autobiography, poems, and other writings, the book spans her entire life and identifies her influences as she became determined, from a young age in Jim Crow North Carolina, to learn and help others appreciate the true history of her people. She endured great hardships in order to graduate from Hunter College, but her efforts to get ahead were thwarted by the Great Depression. She began a lifelong passion for writing to newspapers and public figures about social issues, which she called “confrontation by typewriter,” and was very successful at making those messages heard by people in power, including President Roosevelt. Later, at Howard University Law School, Murray was a strong proponent of overturning *Plessy v. Ferguson* because “separate could never be equal.” In the later chapters, the authors acknowledge the limitations of language employed at the time, speculating that today “transgender / is possibly / what Pauli would call herself...Pauli’s pronouns may have been / they/them/their.” This is a compelling biography of an “unsung force” — an inspiring and transformative figure who broke barriers pivotal to both the civil rights and women’s movements. Appended with photographs, authors’ notes, a timeline, source notes, and a bibliography. LUANN TOTH

Deborah Kalb  
Saturday, April 2, 2022

## Q&A with Terry Catasús Jennings

**Terry Catasús Jennings is the author, with Rosita Stevens-Holsey, of Pauli Murray: The Life of a Pioneering Feminist & Civil Rights Activist, a new biography in verse for upper middle grade readers. Jennings' other books include the Definitely Dominiquita series. She lives in Reston, Virginia. Stevens-Holsey is a niece of Pauli Murray and an elementary school educator. She lives in the Washington, D.C., area.**

*Q: Why did you and Rosita Stevens-Holsey decide to write this biography of feminist and civil rights activist Pauli Murray?*

A: Deborah, thank you so much for having us on your blog.

I “met” Pauli Murray while working on The Women’s Liberation Movement: 1960-1990. She was a force for change in the women’s movement and I wanted to learn more. So I began reading, and the more I read, the more I was amazed. She was as influential in the Civil Rights Movement.

How had I never heard of such a transformational person? There were few adult books about her, and no books for young readers. I had found a kindred spirit, the way that fairness was so important to her, the way she was discriminated against as a woman so I wanted to remedy that. I continued researching Murray’s life and even trying out some writing.

When I met the Reverend Dr. Murray’s niece, Rosita Stevens-Holsey, at a Howard University Law School play about Pauli Murray, To Buy the Sun: The Challenges of Pauli Murray, I found that she had a similar goal—to bring attention to Pauli Murray’s life.

Rosita is an elementary school educator. It seems natural to her to write about her aunt. She knows how important it is for children in their formative years to have positive role models to inspire them, as well as “see” themselves on the page. What better idea than to collaborate on a book about her aunt for young readers?

*Q: Why did you choose to write the book in verse, and how did the two of you collaborate on the writing?*

A: Writing the biography in verse did not come easy. There were many iterations in prose. A picture book biography, a straight prose biography, another straight prose biography. There didn’t seem to be a way of capturing the feeling of Pauli Murray’s life in an engaging and meaningful way.

A verse version made it all come together. Since Pauli Murray was a poet, that idea was most daunting, yet, it was the one that seemed to work the best. It gave a natural voice to all the injustices that Pauli Murray endured.

Another thing that made sense about a biography in verse is that it would be very accessible for young readers. There is so much about Pauli Murray's life that is important and noteworthy that it would take tomes to chronicle it.

In verse, we could make it easy for young readers, and actually very good for those older ones of us who may want to learn about Murray's life, yet don't have the time for a 600-page work.

Rosita and I worked very organically. First we developed a vision of the work. We had each done our own research, so we had ideas of what we wanted to include. Then we developed an outline. We combined our research, and then I wrote, sending the work to Rosita for review.

We spent a week together on a porch on the banks of the Rappahannock River going over every word—Rosita making suggestions and me making changes—and having some wine as a reward each night.

Rosita, being a teacher, didn't let me get away with anything. She is always thinking of the need for proper grammar (being a first-generation Cuban, grammar is not my best subject) so I was grateful to her for that.

The most fun thing was when Rosita talked to her cousins to get information that would fill in our knowledge and answer questions that came up. I listened in on the other side. It was great to be a fly on the wall on their reminiscences of Pauli Murray.

*Q: How did you research Murray's life, and what did you learn that especially surprised you?*

A: I read Pauli's autobiography, and her book *Proud Shoes*. I read her poetry and her sermons. Then I read all the books that I know have been written about her. As new books have been written, I have read them.

I read articles that she wrote for newspapers and articles that were written about her in newspapers. I read her work on "Jane Crow and the Law," and the work that she did cataloguing Jim Crow laws. I read her paper on using the 14th amendment as an argument against segregated schools.

Then I went to the Radcliffe Archive at the Schlesinger Library where Pauli Murray donated all her papers and photographs. It was such a high to hold the same papers that she had held in her hands. I saw how she prepared, when she was arrested in Petersburg, Virginia, for not sitting in the back of the bus, for a possible Supreme Court case to tear down all Jim Crow laws. I listened to Rosita and got a more rounded idea of the who Pauli Murray was.

Rosita spent time searching for documents, newspaper and magazine articles and photographs for her research. She contacted many family members for oral history and any other documents that might help tell the stories about her aunt Pauli.

What was most surprising to me is that Pauli Murray did not get any credit for her work on school segregation—the paper which was used in winning *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Pauli never complained that her idea was used, so there was always this thing in the back of my mind that said, this couldn't have been. Why wouldn't she have been given credit if credit was due? She would have complained if it had, indeed, been her idea.

But she didn't complain because it was such a monumental step forward for her race that she subordinated everything to that accomplishment. She didn't find out until 10 years after it happened, perhaps it was difficult for her to complain so long after the fact. I wish she had made a stink. That might have been the first salvo in her fight for equality for women.

I was also suspicious that she had some homosexual relationships although she never spoke of that in her autobiography or to her family, but you could see it in her papers. Last surprise was finding out that she proposed to Richard Nixon that he nominate her for the Supreme Court.

What surprised Rosita, very much, was her Aunt Pauli's constant near-poverty existence from childhood, through college and beyond.

Throughout her life, she did not know that Pauli's thesis and idea had been used in the landmark Supreme Court victory *Brown v. Board of Education* of Topeka, Kansas. Her aunt Pauli was humble, and she never spoke about that. Rosita did go along when her aunt received an award, but Pauli Murray was not the type to boast.

It was very later on in Pauli Murray's life that Rosita found out about the fact that Murray had a failed, very short-term marriage, but she never found out about her aunt's gender preference or her aunt's feeling that she was "a man trapped in a woman's body" while Murray was alive.

*Q: How would you describe Murray's legacy today?*

A: Pauli Murray's legacy lives in each working woman today. She was responsible, when congressmen were bent on ensuring equal pay for equal work for Black men with the 1964 Civil Rights Act, for including women in the deal.

She pointed out how, if Black men only were included, only about 5 percent of the population would benefit from the act. If all women were included, 56 percent of the population would benefit. The cohort that would receive the most benefit, Murray, argued, were single, head-of-household Black women. They were the most needy.

Without Pauli Murray's efforts, it may have been many more years before women would receive equal pay for equal work, and equality for women would have been much longer in being achieved.

In addition, Pauli Murray advocated publicly for an organization like the NAACP, to ensure that women's grievances were addressed. Because of those statements, she became friends with Betty Friedan. She and Friedan were the moving force behind the creation of NOW, the National Organization for Women, which challenged discrimination against women in the workplace in courts of law.

Rosita is gratified that her Aunt Pauli's legacy is now better known. Pauli Murray is an inspiration to those who still struggle for human rights. She was a pioneer in that field. She was also an inspiration to anyone who want to do something that has never been done before. Rosita is happy that many more groups taking up the baton to learn about Pauli Murray and spread her legacy.

*Q: What are you working on now?*

A: We have just recently submitted to editors a picture book about Pauli Murray's need for fairness and how that guided her to take the actions that changed the world for the better.

We are also working on a longer picture book series, one for older readers, about the ups and downs of human rights, emphasizing our need to protect voting rights. The multi-book series would include Reconstruction, The History of the Electoral College, Jim Crow laws, and Supreme Court Cases that have been overturned.

I have a picture book with award-winning Raúl Colón called *The Little House of Hope / La casita de esperanza*, coming out on May 17 from Neal Porter Books Holiday House.

It is about an immigrant family who shares the home they rent with other immigrants to give them a leg up in the new country. Raúl captured "Cubanness" absolutely perfectly. I am very excited about that book as well.

*Q: Anything else we should know?*

A: I continue working on other middle grade fiction. One is another novel in verse about Cuba and the time of the Cuban Revolution.

Since 2021, Rosita has been working with the Bishop of Episcopal Diocese of Maryland, the president of the Pauli Murray Chapter of UBE, and several Baltimore elected officials to replace a Confederate statue that has been removed with one of Pauli Murray in Bishop's Square.

She is a board member of the National Women's History Alliance which gave Pauli Murray the prestigious "Nevertheless She Persisted" award in 2018. She is also on the board of the Pauli

Murray Center for History and Social Justice, in Durham, North Carolina, which continues to promote her aunt's legacy.

Deborah, thank you so much for chatting. As always, I value your insights.

**--Interview with Deborah Kalb. [Here's a previous Q&A with Terry Catasús Jennings.](#)**

Posted by [Deborah Kalb](#) at [9:42 AM](#)

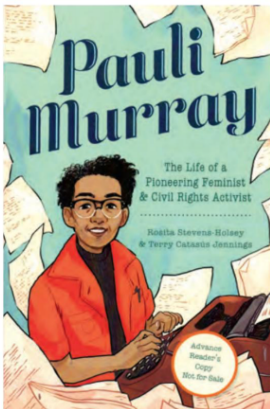
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# the LITERARY HILL

A Compendium of Readers, Writers, Books, & Events

by Karen Lyon



Civil rights pioneer Pauli Murray is brought to life for young readers by Rosita Stevens-Holsey and Terry Catasús Jennings.



## A Thorn in Her Heart

With a Black woman now slated to sit on the Supreme Court, children today may have trouble grasping the extent of the struggle that went before. In “Pauli Murray: The Life of a Pioneering Feminist & Civil Rights Activist,” co-authors Rosita Stevens-Holsey and Terry Catasús Jennings provide middle schoolers with an introduction, written in verse, to a woman who helped pave the way.

Anna Pauline Murray was born in Baltimore in 1910 and brought up by an aunt in North Carolina after the early death of her mother. Growing up in the Jim Crow south, Pauli, as she was known, became a firebrand for justice. “Jim Crow meant / humiliation,” the authors write. “Suffering / the degradation / let Pauli understand the / injustice / and unfairness / of her lot. / That understanding would be / a thorn / she would always want to / pull from deep inside / her heart.”

Despite her twin obstacles of race and gender, Murray persevered, with her passion and clear vision drawing helpful people to her, including Eleanor Roosevelt, who became a lifelong friend and ad-

vocate. Murray eventually earned a law degree—and was the first Black person to earn a doctorate in juridical science from Yale. Her groundbreaking work at Howard University in 1944 laid the foundation for the landmark *Brown v Board of Education* decision a decade later, although she never got credit for it.

As a feminist and “a woman / who felt herself a man / trapped / in a woman’s body,” she was instrumental in ensuring that women were included in the 1969 Civil Rights Act, and, with Betty Friedan, helped found NOW. She was a writer and poet, but perhaps her most lasting legacy is her legal work. “She ennobled the laws / that would make it possible / for each human’s rights to flourish,” the authors write. “She strove / to make a difference / for those who couldn’t advocate / for themselves.” This unsung but transformative voice against discrimination of all kinds died in 1985 just shy of her 75th birthday.

Rosita Stevens-Holsey is Murray’s niece and a teacher who promotes her aunt’s legacy through speaking and personal appearances ([www.paulimurraycenter.com](http://www.paulimurraycenter.com)). Terry Catasús Jennings is a local award-winning author of children’s fiction, non-fiction, and fact-based fiction ([www.terrycjennings.com](http://www.terrycjennings.com)).

## Exhibit A

Next time you visit a Smithsonian Museum exhibition, you might want to think about what went on behind the scenes to bring it to fruition. In many cases, the process belies the appeal of the finished product.

In “Curating the American Past: A Memoir of a Quarter Century at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History,” Pete Daniel exposes the warts-and-all wrangling

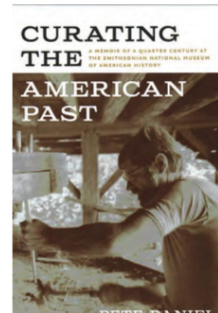
course of his curatorial career. A historian with a distinguished reputation, he often found himself battling unsympathetic directors to maintain a scholarly anchor for the exhibitions he curated. This was especially true, he notes, as Federal support for museums waned and administrators turned more and more to corporations and wealthy donors who demanded “celebratory” exhibits that presented a one-sided “heroic view of history.”

As a result, curators frequently “seized on dubious ideas simply because there was funding or shaded scripts to avoid controversy.” Daniel contends that the Smithsonian’s reluctance to confront controversial subjects not only demeaned museum staff but also denied visitors the benefits of their scholarship and permitted “dangerous mythology to fester.” He places the blame squarely on “unlettered Smithsonian secretaries, feckless museum directors, and meddling politicians,” who, he claims, have imperiled the mission of the institution.

Despite his ongoing battles, Daniel displays a passion not only for presenting the complex and exciting history of America to the public, but also for the hard work that goes into mounting an exhibition: the collecting, collaborating, interviewing, and researching. His pathbreaking exhibitions—on American agriculture, music, and photography—represent a legacy of historical integrity and an eloquent rebuff to vi-



Pete Daniel relates his experiences as a former curator at the National Museum of American History in “Curating the





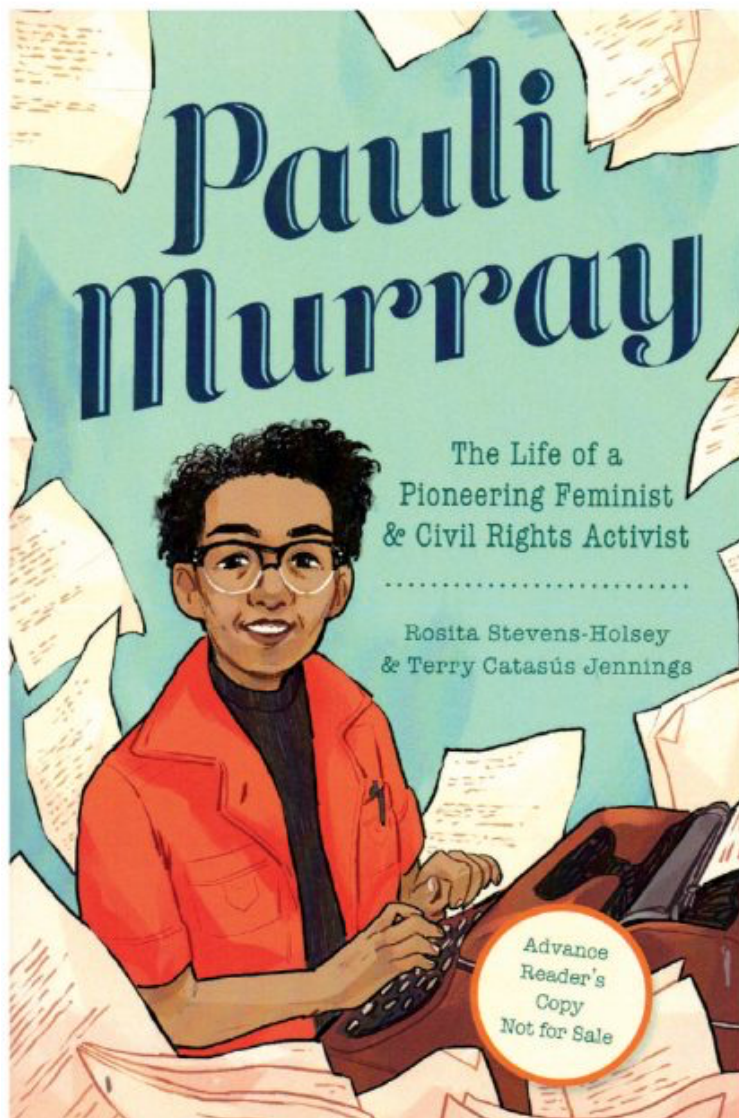
## A Woman Who Helped Pave the Way

Pioneering Feminist & Civil Rights Activist Pauli Murray Blazed Trail for Change

By

**Elizabeth O'Gorek**

-April 25, 2022



Civil rights pioneer Pauli Murray is brought to life for young readers by Rosita Stevens-Holsey and Terry Catasús Jennings.

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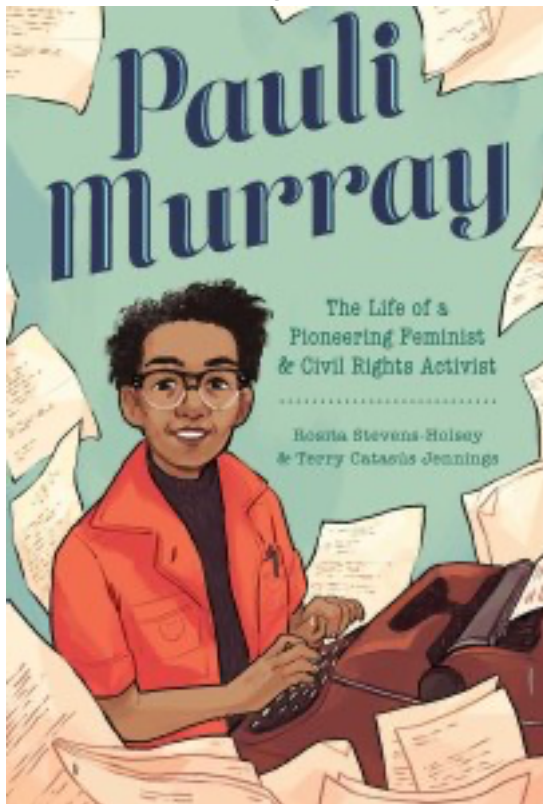
## MOM READ IT

### Rosemary Kaliditis

**MIDDLE GRADE, NON-FICTION, TWEEN READS**

[Pauli Murray: An activist's life in verse](#)

Posted on May 28, 2022



*Pauli Murray: The Life of a Pioneering Feminist & Civil Rights Activist*, by Rosita Stevens-

Holsey & Terry Catasús Jennings, (Feb. 2022, little bee books), \$18.99, ISBN: 9781499812510

Ages 8-12

Haven't heard of Pauli Murray before? Remedy that and pick up this biography in verse, written by one of the civil rights activist's nieces and Terry Catasús Jennings, author of the [\*Definitely Dominguita\* chapter book series](#). Born in 1910, Pauli Murray chafed under the Jim Crow South and what she called "Jane Crow": further prejudice against women. She would become a friend to Eleanor Roosevelt and a voice for the oppressed; she created arguments that would eventually form the Brown vs. Board of Education Topeka backbone ([with no credit](#)) and the 1964 decision that won workplace equality for women ([credited, thanks to Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#)).

Pauli Murray is told in verse, giving poetic gravitas to her life from her early childhood; the early death of her mother and separation of the siblings, which saw Pauli Murray move to Baltimore to live with her aunt, who eventually adopted her; her life in the Jim Crow South, which awakened the activist in her, and her work to dismantle the white male patriarchy that sought to "other" her and hold her, and other women and people of color, down. Queer and Black, she was a force for positive change. [She went to jail for refusing to sit in a broken seat in the back of a bus long before Rosa Parks](#), and, like Martin Luther King Jr., was inspired by Gandhi's promotion of protest through nonviolence.

Back matter includes author's notes, a timeline of Murray's life, endnotes, and a bibliography. An eloquent, powerful biography for upper middle graders and middle schoolers.

Read more about Pauli Murray at the [Pauli Murray Center for History and Social Justice's website](#) and the [National Women's History Museum. VideoNotes and More has a free mini doc on Pauli Murray at TeachersPayTeachers.](#)



Hello **Little Bee Books**,

Thank you for submitting your book for review. One of our talented reviewers has read your title and a review has been published.

**Title Name:** Pauli Murray: The Life of a Pioneering Feminist and Civil Rights Activist

**Author Name:** Jennings, Terry Catasús

**Review:** Pauli Murray fought for equality for all people throughout her life. Her powerful prose called for change long before an organized movement raised their voices. As a queer Black woman, Murray faced discrimination for reasons of race, gender, and identity. Those experiences only fueled her determination that everyone, regardless of race or gender, should receive equal treatment and have equal opportunities. Her contributions to the civil rights and women's rights movements deserve to be celebrated. As a law student, Murray penned what would become winning arguments in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Twenty years later, her arguments again led to laws protecting women in the workplace. Straightforward verse tells the story of Murray's life, bringing the tale of this hero of human rights to young readers for the first time. The book highlights quotes from Murray herself as well as some of her own poetry. The book highlights Murray's indomitable spirit in its telling of her early life through college and her work as a writer and lawyer. Photographs and a timeline anchor the events of Murray's life and her pivotal contributions to history. All in all, this is an inspiring text which expertly delivers the story of the famed civil rights activist and renown feminist to young readers. Highly recommended.

**Ages:** 8 - 14

**Reviewer Rating:** 5



# VIRGINIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**Alumni eNews**

**January 2023**

**Rosita Stevens-Holsey and Terry Catasús Jennings, [\*Pauli Murray: The Life of a Pioneering Feminist & Civil Rights Activist\*](#)**

This is an enthralling telling of Pauli Murray's life written by her niece Rosita Stevens-Holsey and by Terry Catasús Jennings. They write Murray's story in an accessible manner intended for middle-school readers—though older readers will also be inspired! Following the example of Rev. Murray's profound poetry, the biography is written in verse, such that Murray's life jumps off the page into our hearts and souls. Murray's life is a testimony to persistent longing for justice and keeping hope amid adversity. When the doctoral summer residency celebrated Pauli Murray's feast day last summer, Stevens-Holsey generously came to campus to offer greetings from the Murray family. Her presence was a wonderful gift, as is her book!