

A Place Inside of Me: A Poem to Heal the Heart

Zetta Elliott, illus. Noa Denmon

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020

Reviews

- [The Horn Book Magazine](#) (Dec. 21, 2020): “In this powerfully lyrical poem, Elliott articulates what resides “deep down inside” of the African American, skateboard-loving, first-person protagonist: joy, sorrow, fear, anger, hunger, pride, peace, and more. While the protagonist speaks, Denmon’s illustrations, primarily in blue, pale yellow, and mauve, depict the tween boy doing skateboard tricks (showing the bottom of his board that’s covered in peace and justice stickers) and spending time with friends, while muted backgrounds depict life in his urban neighborhood. This book delivers positivity, despite the inclusion of police brutality, a Black Lives Matter protest, and a vigil for the dead — all of which affirm the child’s realities. At school, when he presents his work to his classmates, great figures such as Mae Jemison, Jackie Robinson, Louis Armstrong, Maya Angelou, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. appear on the opposite mural-like page, inspiring him as he takes pride in the past. On a page with no white space, a group of multigenerational Black individuals with different skin tones, facial features, hairstyles, and expressions faces the reader. The boy declares them “triumphant & beautiful,” as faintly visible images of African women peer from the background, carrying baskets of food on their heads — referencing the ancestry of those in the foreground. A well-crafted, twenty-first-century love poem by two truth-telling Black women artists and activists.”
- [Publishers Weekly](#) (Sept. 2, 2020): “This poignant poem follows a Black child as they process emotions following a tragedy and find renewal in community action. The child gleans pleasure from skateboarding and playing basketball, until police killing a girl disrupts their equilibrium. As the protagonist recognizes internal sorrow, fear, and anger in turn, they join Black Lives Matter protests and attend a candlelight vigil. Identifying the pride, compassion, and hope they draw from community, the child ultimately concludes, “I am in love with/ my people/ all people,” and determines to “love myself/ most of all.” Denmon’s textured, dynamic illustrations situate a compassionate community among murals of flowers and vines. The characters’ varying ages, cultures, skin tones, features, and personal styles reflect a diversity of Black experiences, notably in a spread that portrays Black visionaries through the ages (including Beyoncé, Maya Angelou, Malcolm X, and Louis Armstrong). A resonant exultation of community and the importance of self-reflection. Ages 4–8.”
- [CBC Choices 2021](#): “A single illustrated poem touches on the multitude of feelings—joy, sorrow, fear, anger, pride, peace, compassion, hope—that all live deep inside a young Black boy as he moves through the world on his skateboard. The background images show scenes occurring in the boy’s life, and in the Black community at large, that inspire each of the emotions he talks about in a narrative that concludes with the boy making a statement of affirmation of self-love. The shifting perspectives of the robust illustrations underscore the multidimensional feelings and thoughts that affirm the complexity of the narrator’s emotional reality.”

Awards

- [Caldecott Honor Book](#), 2021

Lists

- [ALA/ALSC Notable Children's Book](#), 2021
- [National Council of Teachers of English \(NCTE\) Notable Poetry Books and Verse Novels](#), 2021
- [Bank Street Center for Children's Literature Best Children's Books of the Year](#), 2021
- [Cooperative Children's Book Center Choices](#), 2021

Response to Challenges

- After a Cold Harbor Elementary School (Hanover County, VA) parent objected to the book's depiction of police violence, it was kept in the school library at the principal's discretion. School spokesperson Chris Whitley said simply "The resolution was that the book will remain in circulation at the school." In a social media post, District Supervisor Michael Herzberg objected to the decision, calling the book "not appropriate" and saying that "Indoctrination has been going on for years and it has to stop." At the following District Supervisors' meeting, Herzberg said that the book has "a dangerous message," and that the school's existing process for reconsideration was "not sufficient." The school has not made any further statement. ([Brightly](#), [Richmond Times-Dispatch](#)) (note: *RTD* article requires an account)
- In a response for Brightly, author Zetta Elliott said, "Children are not immune to social movements. Historically, they've been at the forefront of the struggle for civil rights — integrating public schools and lunch counters — and today, they register first-time voters and organize marches against gun violence and climate change since adults have failed to act. Shouldn't the books they read in school reflect this reality? When I sign copies of *A Place Inside of Me*, I urge young readers to honor all their emotions. No child should be shamed or punished for feeling the righteous rage that often leads to social change. Banning books like mine is a sad attempt to preserve the status quo in a world that's ready to be transformed." ([Brightly](#))