WELCOME TO THIS BOOK!

Our lives matter. This book is a love letter to our ancestors and to the next generation of black changemakers, in the spirit of the song "To Be Young, Gifted and Black."

The iconic song was written by one of the musicians in this book, Nina Simone. She dedicated it to her friend, Lorraine Hansberry—the first black woman to write a Broadway play. She wrote the song as a tribute to Lorraine's speech *"The Nation Needs Your Gifts,"* which she gave to young black creative writers.

When I first started writing, I was unsure about sharing my stories publicly. My late grandfather, who was born in 1911 and grew up in a segregated community, came to me in a dream. He said: "Go to New York. Write. Write the books you needed when you were younger." He saw what I could be, before I could understand the depth of my potential.

For Andrea, the experience of illustrating this book while expecting a baby boy crystallized the importance of books that show people who look like him. We wish for every child who encounters *Young, Gifted and Black* to know that the world needs your "gifts," that they are more than enough, and that we see your greatness today, tomorrow, and beyond.

We both believe in the power of creating what we need to see. The books we read and the media we consume deeply influence our understanding of who we are and what we can be—if you can't see it you can't be it. They also impact how we understand each other. And although a lot has changed since Lorraine's speech and Nina's song were written, the stories in movies, in school, and on television often show a limited view of the achievements and stories of people of color.

All children deserve to see themselves represented positively in stories. That's why we're highlighting the talent and contributions of black changemakers from around the world—for readers of all backgrounds to discover.

This book is a beginning and not an end. We're inviting you on a journey through time, across borders, and even through space (with astronaut Mae Jemison!) that provides a small but mighty snapshot of the infinite amount of celebrated and unsung heroes worldwide, including yourselves and the people you care about.

Let's look to the lessons of the past while imagining what's possible when we dare to be bold. While each of the 52 visionary leaders we've highlighted has unique strengths and have endured various heartbreaks and triumphs, they share their fearless pursuit of the dreams they had as a child.

We hope that you're just as encouraged by the artists, activists, doers, makers, healers, and dreamers who bravely paved the way for us to have a brighter future.

Jamia Wilson & Andrea Pippins



Mary Seacole

NOV. 23, 1805 – MAY 14, 1881
KINGSTON, JAMAICA



Heroine of the Crimean War, Mary Seacole, pioneered as a NURSE who cared for British soldiers at the battlefront.

As a child, young Mary learned about Caribbean medicine from her mother, a free black Jamaican woman. A natural healer, she practiced nursing dolls and pets before tending to humans.

By 1854, Mary was living in London when the suffering of soldiers in the Crimean War went public. At the start of the war, her application to join Florence Nightingale's nursing team was rejected—like many others who were refused due to their race or class. Determined to help, Mary put her nursing skills to use and went to war at her own expense.

In 1855, she built the British Hotel near Balaklava to care for injured soldiers. She helped contain the cholera outbreak by distributing remedies in hospitals on the Crimean frontlines.

Although she passed away in 1881, *"Mother Seacole"* is remembered for bravely running a business, kindly caring for ill and injured warriors, and defying discrimination during an era when black women's rights were limited.



Matthew Henson

AUGUST 8, 1866 – MARCH 9, 1955 · NANJEMOY, MARYLAND · USA

Matthew Alexander Henson was the first African-American Arctic EXPLORER. He made six exploration voyages over the course of 18 years.

Born to poor tenant farmers who passed away during his childhood, Matthew became a dishwasher at Janey's Home-Cooked Meals Café to support himself when he was about eleven years old. One of his favorite parts of the work was learning about the customers' lives. He was especially interested in sailors and any interesting voyages.

Aged 12, he walked forty miles from his home to Baltimore to work on a merchant boat. Once he was hired, he learned how to read and write from the ship's captain. Always adventurous, Matthew sailed all around the world.

In 1890, he joined voyager Robert Peary's first Arctic expedition across the northern tip of Greenland. He went on to cover almost 10,000 miles on dogsleds across Greenland and Canada.

Matthew's team made history by becoming the first explorers to reach the North Pole in 1909. Matthew declared, *"I think I'm the first man to sit on top of the world."*

AVA DUVERNAY

AUGUST 24, 1972
LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA
USA

Ava DuVernay was the first black female FILM DIRECTOR to win a Golden Globe Award, and the first African American to win Best Director at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival.

As a child, Ava grew up near Compton, a mostly black and Latino city in southern Los Angeles County. Throughout the school year, she attended an all-girls Catholic school, and discovered her love of movies while watching films with her Aunt Denise.

Ava often visited her father's childhood home in Hayneville, Alabama during summer vacations. Later, Duvernay said that trips to her father's hometown inspired her Oscar nominated film *Selma*, about marches for voter equality in the 1960s.

As a publicist turned filmmaker, Duvernay attributes her success to creativity and determination. She advises aspiring directors to *"Be passionate and move forward with gusto every single hour of every single day until you reach your goal."*





BESSIE COLEMAN

JANUARY 26, 1892 - APRIL 30, 1926
ATLANTA, TEXAS · USA

Bessie Coleman was an AIRSHOW PILOT, and the first African American and Native American to stage a public flight.

One of 13 kids, Bessie trekked for four hours a day to her one-room school in Texas. Always a high flyer, she excelled at mathematics and reading. When she wasn't studying, she helped out on her family farm and attended church. Her determination and drive led to her gaining a place at Langston University in Oklahoma. But college fees were expensive, and Bessie had to leave after completing only one semester.

Aged 23, Bessie heard stories from World War One pilots during her job as a manicurist. Their adventures inspired her. Since U.S. flight schools denied women and blacks entry, Bessie became a licensed pilot in France. Although a crash ended the aviator's dream of opening a school for black fliers, her legacy continues. Mae Jemison, the first black female astronaut in space, brought a photo of *"Brave Bessie"* on her first mission.



Barack Hussein Obama served as the 44TH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. He was the nation's first African American president.

Barack Obama was born to a Kenyan economist and an American anthropologist in Honolulu, Hawaii. He spent his childhood attending school and playing basketball in Hawaii and Indonesia. His experiences growing up in Catholic and Muslim schools expanded his worldview, he said *"I benefited from a multiplicity of cultures that all fed me."*

Barack studied at Occidental College, Columbia University. After graduation, he went on to work as a community organizer in Chicago before enrolling at Harvard Law School. After this, he worked as a civil rights lawyer and professor, penned *Dreams of My Father*, a personal story about race and identity, and served as a Senator in Illinois.

His commitment to public service and grassroots organizing secured his two election victories as president.

Michelle Obama is a LAWYER who served as the 44TH FIRST LADY OF THE UNITED STATES (FLOTUS). She pioneered as the first African American FLOTUS.

Michelle LaVaughn Robinson was born and raised in Chicago's South Side. She lived in a tiny bungalow with her parents and her older brother. As a part of a supportive family who valued reading and education, both Michelle and her brother moved forward a grade at school.

Her academic excellence brought her to Chicago's first magnet school for gifted kids, where she graduated as salutatorian. She went on to study at Princeton University and Harvard Law School. She said *"For me, education was power."*

Michelle worked as a lawyer, city administrator, and a community outreach professional. As First Lady, she became known as a riveting public speaker, fashion icon, and advocate for military families, health, and wellness causes.

Barack and Michelle Obama have been married since 1992 and have two daughters called Malia and Sasha.

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

September 15, 1977 · ENUGU, NIGERIA



Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a MacArthur Genius Grant AWARD WINNING AUTHOR. Her writing has been translated into 30 languages.

Chimamanda grew up in Enugu, south-east Nigeria, as one of six children. Her father was a statistics professor and her mother was the University of Nigeria's first woman registrar. Chimamanda began reading when she was four, and started writing as soon as she could spell.

The majority of the books she read in her early life focused on British and American characters, who didn't reflect her reality in Nigeria. Although these books influenced her early writing, she says her discovery of African authors helped her *"Realize that people who looked like me could live in books."* This inspired her to amplify her distinct cultural voice.

Famous for her lectures and writing about gender equality and the value of diverse storytelling, the author of *We Should All Be Feminists* and *Americanah*, opens minds one story at a time.



CATHY FREEMAN

FEBRUARY 16, 1973
SLADE POINT, MACKAY · AUSTRALIA

As the sixth fastest woman of all time, Cathy Freeman made headlines for being a CHAMPION SPRINTER.

When Cathy Freeman's family noticed her running talent, her mother urged her to develop her skill. A member of the Kuku Yalanji people, Cathy faced hardship due to economic instability and racial discrimination. In primary school, she was denied medals that were given to white girls even when she surpassed them on the field.

Despite roadblocks, she persisted: *"You got to try and reach for the stars or try and achieve the unreachable."* A scholarship positioned her to compete at the National School Championships. This paved the way for wins in the Australian National Championships and the World Junior Games.

Cathy made history as the first indigenous Australian to compete in the Olympics. Her trailblazing activity raised awareness about issues impacting indigenous people. When she won the Olympic gold medal in 2000, she ran her victory lap barefoot as a tribute to her heritage.

George Washington Carver

1863 OR 1864 – JANUARY 5, 1943
DIAMOND, MISSOURI · USA



Known as "the plant doctor," SCIENTIST George Washington Carver devised over 100 products using peanuts as his only crop.

George Washington Carver was born into slavery in Diamond Grove, Missouri during the Civil War. At one week old, he was kidnapped by outlaws. He eventually returned to his birthplace towards the end of the war.

George was a sickly child, so he focused on household chores and gardening. When slavery was abolished, he learned to read and write from the family that formerly enslaved him.

After being rejected from college due to discrimination, he studied art, piano, and botany in Iowa. He went on to become the first black student and teacher at Iowa State College.

George's success led him to direct the department of agriculture at the Tuskegee Institute. His findings and inventions helped poor cotton farmers adapt their crops and improve their health. *Time* magazine called him *"Black Leonardo,"* in reference to the Italian artist and inventor Leonardo da Vinci, for his ground-breaking agricultural artistry.

MALORIE BLACKMAN

FEBRUARY 8, 1962
LONDON, ENGLAND
UNITED KINGDOM



Renowned AUTHOR of more than 60 books, including the Noughts and Crosses series, Malorie Blackman was the U.K.'s Children's Laureate.

The daughter of Bajan parents, Malorie Blackman was born in London. A lover of literature, she read all of the children's books in her local library by age 11, including one of her favorite texts, C.S. Lewis' *The Silver Chair*.

Aged 28, Malorie published her first book, *Not So Stupid*, after working as a systems programmer. Before she found a publisher, her manuscript was rejected over 80 times.

Her persistence drove her success as a prolific writer, and as the U.K.'s first black Children's Laureate. During her tenure, the Officer of the Order of the British Empire called for more diversity in children's books. She said, *"Reading is an exercise in empathy; an exercise in walking in someone else's shoes for a while."*