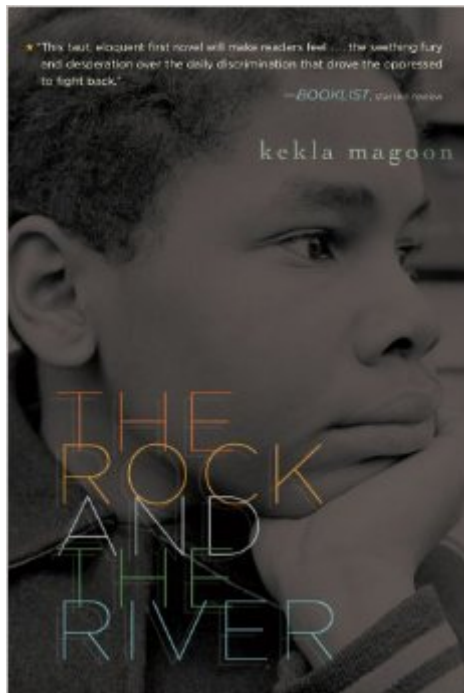


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# The Rock And The River (Coretta Scott King - John Steptoe Award For New Talent)



## Synopsis

In 1968 Chicago, it's not easy for thirteen-year-old Sam to be the son of known civil rights activist Roland Childs. Especially when his older brother, Stick, starts keeping to himself. Then, one day, Sam finds something under Stick's bed that changes everything: literature about the Black Panthers. Suddenly, nothing feels certain anymore. And when Dr. King is shot and killed, Sam's father's words are no longer enough to make him believe in change. This moving, coming-of-age story gracefully encompasses the scope of the struggle between the civil rights and black power movements through an intimate and relatable lens.

## Book Information

Series: Coretta Scott King - John Steptoe Award for New Talent

Paperback: 304 pages

Publisher: Aladdin; Reprint edition (April 6, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1416978038

ISBN-13: 978-1416978039

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 0.9 x 7.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 7 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (31 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #79,866 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #40 in [Books > Teens > Historical Fiction > United States > 20th Century](#) #54 in [Books > Teens > Literature & Fiction > Social & Family Issues > Prejudice & Racism](#) #167 in [Books > Teens > Literature & Fiction > Boys & Men](#)

## Customer Reviews

I have a variety of different bugaboos that I'll periodically remove from my bag of standard complaints and shout about for long periods of time. They're comforting. They bring me peace. One such complaint concerns The Black Panthers and children's literature. Mainly the fact that the two never meet up. Ever. Once in a while a stray bit of YA literature will come along and mention the Panthers, but it's exceedingly rare. The last time it happened ("America Dreaming: How Youth Changed America in the 60's" by Laban Hill) the Panthers got a small chapter and then the book moved on swiftly. I've never been able to figure this out. The Panthers were built for exciting literature. Why ignore their amazing history? "The Rock and the River" by Kekla Magoon answers that question almost immediately. For any author to write about the Panthers they need all the tools at their discretion. They need to be able to show depth, both sides to every issue, complex ideology,

and difficult choices. To be blunt, the writer needs to do a lot more work than you might find in your average fictional fare. A little blood, a little sweat, and a whole bucket of tears appear to have gone into Magoon's novel, and the result is a book that never reaches for the easy answers. This is a book that challenges young readers to think. Always (as we can see here) a dangerous proposition. Being the son of a prominent Civil Rights activist in 1968 Chicago isn't as much fun as you might think. Half the time brothers Stick and Sam are stuck standing for hours at rallies without really feeling connected to the event. Their imposing father (always referred to as "Father" and never "Dad") runs a tight ship. That's why Sam finds it all the stranger when his brother starts hanging out with The Black Panthers. Reconciling what the Panthers say to how they are perceived, particularly by his parents, pushes Sam to choose between two different paths. Or are they really as different as he initially thought? The answer isn't easy to understand. Normally civil rights era novels for young people are easy to write. Racists = bad. Black people and folks friendly to the Civil Rights cause = good. Once in a while a sympathetic child of the racists will get thrown in there for spice, but generally you know what to expect. Good and evil are practically outlined in black markers and thick white paint. Black Panthers put an entirely different spin on the whole outlook. And I admit that I was pretty skeptical when I first picked this book up. I decided right off the bat that I knew how the story would take shape. Sam's older brother would join the Panthers. He'd be initially drawn to how cool they were and then draw back when he saw them do something violent. Then the ending would contain some self-satisfied reinforcement of Civil Rights movement politics and the Panthers would come off looking like they do in the movie "Forrest Gump". Which is to say, no better than thugs. So when the book veered sharply away from my cynical predictions, you could have bowled me over with a spoon. They mention the breakfast program? They mention the classes and all the points in their ten-point platform? And not to spoil it, but if you see the ending of this book coming then I tip my hat to you. It came out of the blue for me. Because a part of what Magoon does so well is to bring issues of class into this book. Class in kids' books usually is used as a foil for a character. Example: Such n' so was poor, and here's the story of how they became rich. In terms of historical fiction, your main character can be poor or they can be friends with someone from the wrong side of the tracks. What "The Rock and the River" does is place its story within the context of class. The Civil Rights movement did a lot of good, but there was a perception amongst lower income blacks that for all the supposed strides, they themselves weren't seeing a lot of change. Police could still go into their neighborhoods, beat them up, and arrest them for no reason at all. There's a moment in the book when Sam's girl, Maxie, points out to him that he may have a different view of how black men get arrested because he's an upper-middle class kid and she lives in a rough part of town.

Because in terms of the who the cops arrest, "They don't need a reason. Maybe they do up where you live, but they sure don't down here." It becomes clear that what the Panthers did well was support their lower-income communities. They gave out free breakfasts. They patrolled the neighborhoods to keep an eye on police abuses. Magoon doesn't point fingers or ever say that one group or another did more immediate good for the poorer people, but you understand why the Panthers existed and why they felt a need to help. As Stick says, "It's the difference between demonstrating and organizing... Between waiting for handouts that aren't coming, or taking care of each other the way we have to. It's the rock and the river, you know? They serve each other, but they're not the same thing." The book is particularly good at showing the reader that particular kind of pain that comes with living with someone (in this case, a parent) that exudes certainty and righteousness at all times. Once you hit a certain age you think that you'll never be able to do enough to please them. So Stick's disillusionment with peaceful protests has as much to do with his thoughts about his father as anything else. As for Sam, he feels like he isn't certain of anything at all. He envies Maxie, Stick, and even his father for believing so completely in their causes while he is left to fend for himself. To figure out what's right from what's wrong. In the midst of all this I was a little surprised to see Sam pretty much going where he wanted, and doing what he wanted for quite a lot of this book. His parents are supposedly keeping him on a tight reign, but at the same time he's getting away with a lot. It just seemed oddly permissive of these otherwise stodgy parents. Also, the plot jumps about a bit. There's a herky jerky quality to it that leaps from place to place and emotion to emotion without there always being a rhyme or reason. Judicious ironing could have helped, I think. The magic of the book, however, lies less in the plotting and more in the effect on the reader. Here Magoon's language is key. Right from the start you're reading sentences like "Rough concrete pillars stood proud above the courthouse steps, looking weathered and bored, like they were tired of carrying the weight of the law on their shoulders." And on the next page, "I was tired of marching, of protesting. Of leaning my back against a wall and expecting the wall to move." I love that right from the start Magoon has honed in on what her character feels and wants and doesn't want. She has a talent for synthesizing a person into their simplest form. Stick and his father? "Not a bone of compromise in either of them." And later in the book Sam ends up supporting his father. "I could tell he was trying not to lean against me, but he had to, so he did." Showing not telling, kids. Showing not telling. Name me a book for young people that explains rioting. Not the effects of the people hurt by it, but why people do it in the first place. Name me a book for kids that contains a sentence equivalent to, "... as long as you think being a Panther just means carrying a gun, you won't be able to understand what's happening here." Name me a book for kids that even mentions the Black

Panthers in a complex manner. The good and the bad. The problems and the solutions. As it stands, Kekla Magoon's book is an original. There are few enough books out there like it, and I think we have room in this world for more. A smart, sensible, deeply layered title. A necessary addition to our shelves from a time period too often colored in black and white terms.

Sometimes you read a book and it's like candy--delicious for the moment and then gone. Other times you read a book that is like a nourishing meal-- fills you up and leaves you satisfied for longer. *THE ROCK AND THE RIVER* is a banquet of piquant flavors that play against each other to delicious result\*. Sam's father is a colleague of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., following Dr. King's doctrine of peaceable protest. Sam's older brother Stick is working with the Black Panthers, and wants to see change come faster, even if it means some violent confrontations. The Chicago police don't come off looking very good in this book, but the author makes it clear there is blame enough (and good intentions enough) to go around. Sam's friend Maxine, and Sam's mother are both richly drawn and strong females in Sam's life. The action starts building from the first pages, and keeps moving at a steady pace. Near the end of the book, Sam is faced with a serious courtroom choice that I felt sure would be the final conflict in the book. A chapter further on I was sitting with my jaw dropped open, not believing what had just happened. This book is one that I can easily recommend to young adult readers, just for the pleasure of reading it, but it would be an excellent addition to high school social studies classes as well. The final few pages of the book are the Author's Note giving brief background of the civil rights movement and the Black Panther party.\*Reviewer's Note: I just finished reading *JULIE & JULIA*, another excellent title for a very different audience, hence the food-oriented review comments!

I decided to purchase *The Rock and the River* after reading positive editorial reviews, and was rewarded in doing so. To call it a stunning coming of age story is not merely enough, as it transcends the genre. It is beautifully written and the prose is deep without overshadowing the humanity of the characters. It is one of those novels that will make you think, cry, and remember. I was disappointed to learn that this is the author's first novel (while at the same time being pleasantly surprised by the fact). I look forward to reading her next book.

*The Rock and the River* is realistic fiction set in the height of the civil rights movement. The very real and emotional conflict centers on a young teen torn between his parents belief in, and work for, Dr. King's non-violent methods and his older brother's belief in, and work for, the Black Panthers. All of

the characters are committed to change and willing to suffer the consequences of their actions, but protective of their families and friends. Sam, and his brother Sticks, are fully developed characters, whose struggles to make a difference and figure out the right thing to do will engage the reader. Author Kekla Magoon brilliantly shows the complexity and depth of both the Black Panthers and non-violent protest points of view in the fight for civil rights. And she does it without taking sides on which group did more or which group was better. She also did not neatly wrap up the moral conflicts of Sam and Sticks with a simple resolution. *The Rock and The River* is a great read for teens and adults.

Fantastic book. Was required reading for one of my kids, but I ended picking it up and finishing it the same day. While it may take place in the 60s, the same issues confront our society today. So glad it was required reading for my 7th grader. Strongly recommend for all middle school students.

It starts slow but ends with a punch. ALL kids should read this, to understand why frustrations of the past reach into the present. Only when we are unbiased enough to hear all sides can we build constructively and find peace.

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