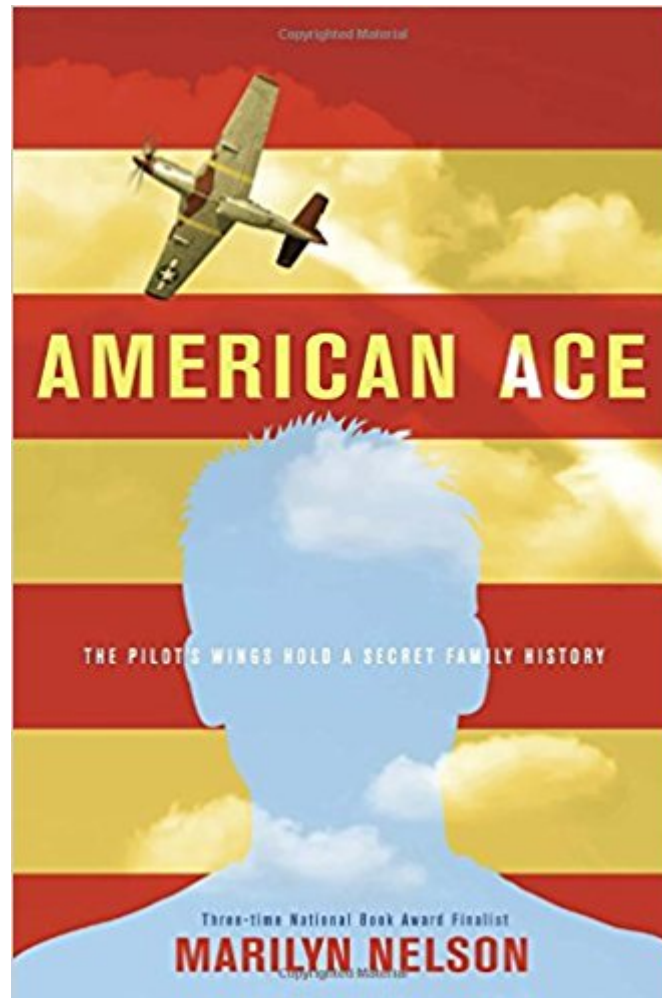




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# American Ace



## Synopsis

This riveting novel in verse, perfect for fans of Jacqueline Woodson and Toni Morrison, explores American history and race through the eyes of a teenage boy embracing his newfound identity. Connor's grandmother leaves his dad a letter when she dies, and the letter's confession shakes their tight-knit Italian-American family: The man who raised Dad is not his birth father. But the only clues to this birth father's identity are a class ring and a pair of pilot's wings. And so Connor takes it upon himself to investigate—a pursuit that becomes even more pressing when Dad is hospitalized after a stroke. What Connor discovers will lead him and his father to a new, richer understanding of race, identity, and each other.

## Book Information

Lexile Measure: 0780 (What's this?)

Hardcover: 128 pages

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Language: English

ISBN-10: 0803733054

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Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 6 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #214,704 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #124 in Books > Teens >

Historical Fiction > United States > 20th Century #130 in Books > Teens > Historical Fiction >

Military #178 in Books > Teens > Literature & Fiction > Social & Family Issues > Prejudice & Racism

Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

## Customer Reviews

Gr 8 Up •When she dies, Nonna Lucia leaves a letter to Connor's father, her oldest son, which reveals that he is not the biological son of her husband but rather of an American who died during World War II. It is as if Connor's father has lost himself as well as his beloved mother; he is devastated. The confusion and questions emerging from the discovery propel Connor to explore who this mysterious grandfather might have been. It emerges that he was one of the storied, heroic Tuskegee Airmen. Through 45 poems in Connor's voice, Nelson considers such matters as identity,

heredity, nurture, race, and family. Connor and his father, who is teaching him to drive, have ample opportunity to probe tentatively and delicately into their feelings about such things while they're on the road. Connor's research takes on urgency after his father suffers a stroke, and his gradual recovery is deftly linked to Connor's increasing pride about their newfound heritage. VERDICT Nelson packs a good deal into these verses, and though the subject matter is weighty, she leavens it with humor and deep family affection. —Miriam Lang Budin, Chappaqua Library, NY

Praise for *American Ace* — "[Nelson's] meticulous verse is the perfect vehicle to convey the devastating fragility of racial and familial identity in an America where interracial love is still divided through the problem of the color line." —Kirkus Reviews, starred review — "Inspired by her father's remarkable experiences as a Tuskegee Airman, esteemed historian-poet Nelson has aced it again. . . . This slice of history has been told before, but not like this." —Booklist — "Nelson's powerful command of language is inarguable." —Publishers Weekly — "A quietly powerful story about race, ignorance, and identity from a poetry master." —Bustle.com — "A skillful exploration into identity, culture, and race." —Examiner.com — "A gorgeous story that stays with you long after you finish." —Buzzfeed — "A bright spot in historical fiction." —BookPage — "Stunning." —Shelf Awareness

satisfied

This book is about identity. It is told completely in prose, which makes it very fast to read. The small size and fast story does not take away from the depth and the message that Marilyn Nelson is showing. This book is told from the perspective of Conner, who is Italian and never considered himself to be anything else. But when Conner's father discovers that his birth father is not who he thought, Conner takes it upon himself to rediscover himself through discovering his father's father. This is a good book for middle schoolers to start discussions about race and identity. It went by very fast and although it did not have a ton of character development or dialogue, it instead invoked the reader to fill in the blanks and put themselves in the shoes of Conner so that maybe they would be able to discover something about themselves as well.

Summary: When Connor's grandmother Lucia dies, she leaves a letter for his father, revealing that Connor's grandfather wasn't the Italian man

his father grew up with; instead, it was an American pilot who was in Italy during World War II. Connor's father grew up in a tight-knit Italian family, and the news is devastating to him at first. Along with the letter, Lucia left a school ring that belonged to the pilot. Connor uses the ring to research his grandfather. Eventually, he learns that this man was African American, one of the famed Tuskegee Airmen. Just as the mystery is about to be solved, Dad has a stroke and is hospitalized. Connor helps him heal, both physically and emotionally, by learning and sharing more and more of the courageous history of the Airmen. 117 pages; grades 7-10.

**Pros:** In an author's note, Marilyn Nelson writes how she wanted to tell the story of the Tuskegee Airmen, and eventually had the idea to write a book in which the main character gradually learns their history. She achieves this brilliantly in just 45 poems, told in Connor's voice. The history is fascinating, and so is the story of this family who must rethink their entire identity in the light of revelations about their cultural heritage.

**Cons:** The structure of Part 7, in which Connor tells his father the story of the Tuskegee Airmen while his dad is convalescing in the hospital, is a little bit confusing.

**Review copy:** purchased

It's funny to think about identity, Dad said. Now I wonder how much of us we inherit, and how much we create. Connor and his family go through some soul-searching as they find out their heritage is something other than what they had always believed. We see the unfolding story through Connor's eyes. His family has suffered the loss of his beloved Nonna and Connor is concerned about his father's grief and possible depression. Otherwise life had been moving along as expected. Connor spends a lot of time with his dad as he practices driving to get his license. Things become complicated quickly though when Connor's father explains that he has no idea who his father was. The journey to discover their family history leads them to new ways of thinking about themselves and the society they inhabit. After learning about their more complicated heritage, Connor sees his school in a new way. I walked between classes in slow motion, seeing the ancient intertribal wars still being fought, in the smallest gestures. Little things I hadn't noticed before: the subtle put-downs, silent revenges. The story is delivered in nine parts containing five vignettes each. These are made up of two twelve line stanzas written in iambic pentameter. I often forget that poetry can be incredibly mathematical. Such a structure makes for extremely deliberate choices. This format meant there wasn't much room for explanation. Nelson kept things tight. I appreciate that and so will readers looking for something quick yet meaningful. I almost always enjoy a novel in verse. I like the way Nelson delivers small packages of information and makes

every word count. The titles are even important. In part seven, the text shifts a bit and becomes a paper for Connor's Honors History class. This brought in something I really appreciated. Photos of airmen from WWII are included every few pages. These added a lot to the story. With the photos, the pilots became something more than history. They became individuals with lives and stories of their own. In the author's note, Nelson explains about the information for Connor's report, "I did not invent any of the facts Connor learns. That part of the story is true. And still amazing. One thing did shake me out of the story a bit. The setting appears to be the present day since Connor uses google and his father has rapid DNA testing. With Connor being a teen, it seems a little strange that his grandfather is old enough to have been a pilot in WWII. My grandfather fought in the war and my children are older than Connor. It sort of works because Connor's father has a child and grandchildren from a previous relationship so he was not young when he had Connor. It made me do some math though because it seemed difficult to believe. Recommendation: Get it soon if you are a fan of verse novels or enjoy historical novels and want something quick. Otherwise, borrow it someday. I truly enjoyed the book, but if I were recommending Nelson's poetry, I would first hand someone A Wreath for Emmett Till and How I Discovered Poetry. Extra: Warning the following interview reveals their family heritage. I tried not to do that here since the publisher's summary didn't. If you want to know precisely what history this book explores though, please read this Publisher's Weekly interview with author [...]"

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