

# 10 Children's Books Tell Uplifting Stories About the Lives and Work of Black Artists Including Tyree Guyton, Frank Bowling, Laura Wheeler Waring, and Ernie Barnes

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on May 8, 2020 • 10:58 am



This week is National Children's Book Week (May 4-10), a celebration of books and the joy of reading

RIFE WITH NARRATIVES about doing whatever it takes to overcome personal and societal challenges to pursue their dreams, the lives of artists and designers offer young readers invaluable life lessons with a dose of culture and history.

The experiences of Detroit artist **Tyree Guyton** offer a powerful example. The home of Motown and the birthplace of techno music, Detroit is also famous for [The Heidelberg Project](#), a densely curated street installation composed of brightly painted houses covered in polka dots, art cars, and irreverent yard sculptures composed of found objects.

A virtual outdoor museum, the project was founded by Guyton, a sculptor and painter who grew up on Heidelberg Street. At age 9, he was encouraged by his grandfather, a house painter, to pick up a brush and "paint the

world.”

A voracious collector of discarded treasures, Guyton painted everything he encountered—his grandfather’s ladder, wheels, shoes, bottle caps, license plates, toys, and small appliances—transforming abandoned castoffs into “Magic Trash.” He declared he was going to be an artist. His mother was dismayed at the pronouncement. His grandfather was delighted.

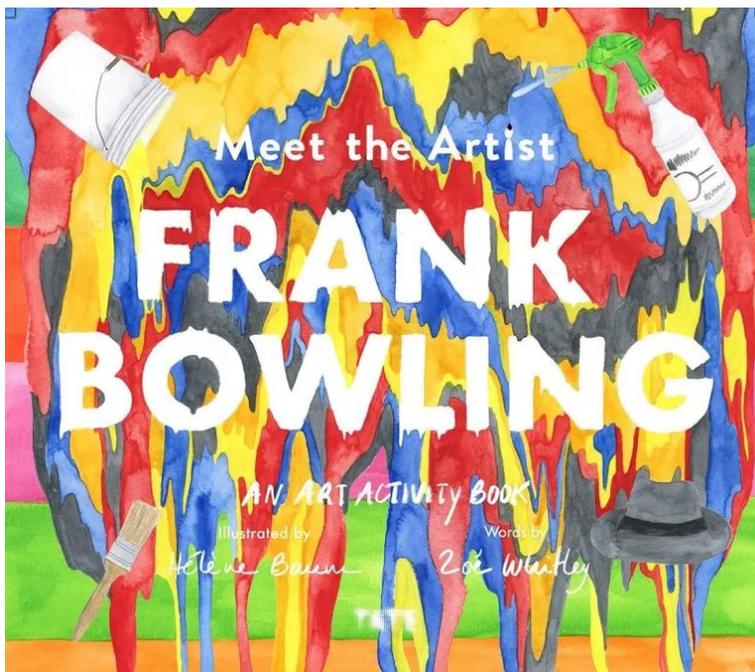
*A voracious collector of discarded treasures, Tyree Guyton painted everything he encountered—his grandfather’s ladder, wheels, shoes, bottle caps, license plates, toys, and small appliances—transforming abandoned castoffs into ‘Magic Trash.’*

Years later, after the 1967 riots and residents fleeing to the suburbs in subsequent years, homes on the block were abandoned and became blighted and overrun with trash and troublemakers. “Magic Trash: The Story of Tyree Guyton and His Art” unfurls the experiences of the artist and how he rescued his community, with the help of his grandfather and local children, transforming a poverty-stricken, chaotic scene into a riot of color.

“Tyree grabbed his brush and burrowed through rubbish. He cast spells on suitcases, toilets, and a slide trombone. Before the colors dried, Grandpa Sam hurried out to help,” author J.H. Shapiro writes. “They painted a busted bus. They tied shoes to trees. They flung broken bikes and cast-off tires on burned-out buildings and forgotten yards. And they painted *Faces of God* in blue, black, and orange. Their street sparkled.”

Once-doubtful neighbors and former troublemakers eventually joined in, too. Guyton covered houses in pink, blue, yellow, and purple and gave them joyful names such as “Fun House” and “Dotty Wotty.” The artist served in the U.S. Army, worked at an auto plant, and as a firefighter, but only found true fulfillment beautifying his community. For nearly 35 years tourists from around the world have been visiting the one-of-a-kind project.

Books about Guyton, painter Frank Bowling; late artists Ernie Barnes (1938-2009) and Laura Wheeler Waring (1887-1948); fashion designer Ann Cole Lowe (1898-1981); architect Philip Freelon (1953-2019); and several other creatives, tell similarly uplifting and inspiring stories. **CT**



“Meet the Artist: Frank Bowling.” by Zoé Whitley, illustrated by Hélène Baum (Tate, 32 pages, Ages 5-7). / Published by Dec. 17, 2019