

I, Juan De Pareja: The Story Of A Great Painter And The Slave He Helped Become A Great Artist



Synopsis

When the great Velázquez was painting his masterpieces at the Spanish court in the seventeenth century, his colors were expertly mixed and his canvases carefully prepared by his slave, Juan de Pareja. In a vibrant novel which depicts both the beauty and the cruelty of the time and place, Elizabeth Borton de Treviño tells the story of Juan, who was born a slave and died an accomplished and respected artist. Upon the death of his indulgent mistress in Seville, Juan de Pareja was uprooted from the only home he had known and placed in the charge of a vicious gypsy muleteer to be sent north to his mistress's nephew and heir, Diego Velázquez, who recognized at once the intelligence and gentle breeding which were to make Juan his indispensable assistant and companion – and his lifelong friend. Through Juan's eyes the reader sees Velázquez's delightful family, his working habits and the character of the man, his relations with the shy yet devoted King Philip IV and with his fellow painters, Rubens and Murillo, the climate and customs of Spanish court life. When Velázquez discovers that he and Juan share a love for the art which is his very life, the painter proves his friendship in the most incredible fashion, for in those days it was forbidden by law for slaves to learn or practice the arts. Through the hardships of voyages to Italy, through the illnesses of Velázquez, Juan de Pareja loyally serves until the death of the painter in 1660. I, Juan de Pareja is the winner of the 1966 Newbery Medal. Latino Interest.

Book Information

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Age Range: 12 - 18 years

Customer Reviews

“The author creates a fresh and different approach to biographical fiction. The novel is also an eloquent testimonial to the bonds between races.”
— School Library Journal, Starred Review
“This brilliant novel captures and holds the attention from its rhythmic opening sentence—‘Él, Juan de Pareja, was born into slavery’—all the way through to the end. . . . A splendid book, vivid, unforgettable.”
— The New York Times Book Review
“The book is full of memorable scenes . . . Many paths of interest lead from this original, beautifully written story.”
— The Horn Book Magazine
“An excellent novel, written in the form of an autobiography, about the painter Velázquez and his Negro slave and assistant, Juan de Pareja . . . [who] was legally prohibited from painting because he was a slave.”
— The Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books

Elizabeth Borton de Treviño (1904-2000) was the highly acclaimed author of many books for young people. Born in California, it was her move to Mexico in the 1930s that inspired many of her books, including *El Gãfã ero: A True Adventure Story* and *Leona: A Love Story*. She won the Newbery Medal in 1966 for *I, Juan de Pareja*.

I, Juan... won the Newbery Medal in 1966. While I’m sure this isn’t the only Historical Fiction Book to win the medal, it is the first that I have read. On to the review. What I liked:

1. Historical Fiction. The main characters in the story were real people. You can go online and read about Juan de Pareja and his master Diego Velazquez. You can google search their paintings and read about the king that they served and the Pope Innocent X that Velazquez painted. One of my favorite parts of reading this book was to pause for a moment, and go look up the people mentioned in the book and the places. This book would be a great book for a classroom study as it presents many projects to do in addition to the reading of the book.
2. Historical accuracy: Trevino did her homework in the casting the setting perfectly, as well as how she portrayed secondary characters, like the King of Spain and the Pope. I also appreciated her attention to detail in the lesser characters like the apprentices as well as the delivery gypsy(muleteer).
3. Death is portrayed as a way of life: There is a lot of death in this book, and the reason is there was a lot of death during this time. Sickness was feared and medicine was very basic. Trevino mentions barber surgeons which is another reference to historical accuracy, something interesting to look up independently.
4. Relationships: I loved how

the relationships evolve between Juan and just about every other character in the book.⁵ Lolis: Lolis is a slave girl that shows up towards the end of the book. She serves as a great character opposite Juan in that she seems to be a lot of things Juan isn't, things like opinionated, hot headed, etc... I immediately like her in the book. It's like She is Donald Duck and Juan is Mickey Mouse. Sure Juan is what the story is about(Mickey is the face of Disney), but we all love Donald. What I didn't like:¹ The language used in the book will require a little knowledge of the time. While not entirely a bad thing, there are some words in the book that are innocent, but in today's culture might find offensive.² Juan seems to be perfect in this book. I mean he is portrayed as someone who never really makes a mistake and seems to handle adversity perfectly. While I appreciate his goodness, I can't help but wonder why the author didn't give us a little more description of his failings. I really enjoyed this book. I felt like it was the right length, and I was entertained from start to finish. Interesting note about the author, Elizabeth Borton De Trevino. She was an American Citizen, but she wrote this book in Mexico City where she lived with her husband. So while she was by the definition of the criteria for the medal a candidate, she may not have fit into the spirit of the medal being American children's literature. Also, Trevino wrote several Pollyanna books in her life, and wrote a series of books about her life as part of a wealthy family in Mexico

The initial stumbling block with "I, Juan de Pareja" is that a slave and Spanish renaissance painter can have a warm and caring personal relationship. It is not unreasonable to question whether a slave can ever have a good relationship with the person who owns him. But if you can cross this initial barrier, you will find "I, Juan de Pareja" to be a good read. The book is well written and filled with rich period details. My nine year old daughter and I both enjoyed the book. The book works only if you can suspend a certain amount of disbelief.

I don't think my kids would read this, but I enjoyed the story. The author does a good job describing some aspects of a slave's life in an age appropriate way. It's nice to have a different story line, and I really like historical fiction -- I think you could describe this as historical fiction.

My kids and I loved this book! It has been a great way to open up the school year. We are studying the Renaissance and Reformation time period. We laughed and cried through out the book. It really brought life to the art and makes us now think of the artist behind the paintings.

Fine condition.

Excellent book. My students thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. Will make this a permanent part of our literature series in class.

Great book. Not done with it yet but great none the less.

Trevino's 1966 Newbery winner may seem a sleeper by today's standards of violence and adult themes in YA literature. Nevertheless, I consider it an excellent representative for both Biography and Historical Fiction genres. Careful research yields authentic 17th century detail as Trevnio recreates the Baroque court of Spain, from the viewpoint of the royal painter, Diego Velasquez, and his faithful Black slave, Juan de Pareja. Narrated in the first person by Juanico from his sheltered childhood, this gently-paced book relates the historical events and reconstructed dialogue and emotions for much of his life. The poor boy suffered horribly at the hands of a cruel gypsy mule driver, but once he reached the haven of his new master in Madrid, such torture would never be inflicted on him again. Juan discovers that he also possesses artistic talents and ambitions, but in Baroque Spain it was illegal for a slave to practice any form of art. Thus he had to steal colors and paint in secret, as the punishment for disobedience to this particular law was most severe--even unto death. During this partial biography of the great court painter, Velasquez, we meet two other famous artists who visited the master: Rubens and Murillo. We are treated to private, behind-the-scenes glimpses of the blond King and his pompous entourage. As Juan travels in Italy with his famous Master, he receives conflicting impressions of Italians and their artistic style. Yet he earns the respect of those around him with his impressive, folkloric healing skills. But art is his private passion; he refuses to stop painting on the sly. Since he is an honest man, such deception causes him great guilt and shame. Otherwise, his life as a slave is almost enviable, since he does not chafe at the yoke of slavery--he merely resents the unfair restrictions on talent based on inherited bondage. I was impressed by his loyalty to and sincere devotion for the Master, even after Velasquez changed their status. This story reveals the meaning of true friendship, which knows no racial or ethnic barriers. This is an excellent book for Black History relations; it includes a brief discussion of mankind's great curse: slavery. There are different ways to accomplish the goal of peaceful coexistence between races; this book leads introspective readers to reflect on the philosophy of Life.

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