Every day Charles White goes to the library and looks at picture books and watches the people around him. Later he draws what he has seen on scraps of paper. Over time he learns to be patient and observant, and by working with art students painting in the park, he learns how to mix and use oil paints.

As he grows up, Charles creates powerful portraits of the figures he sees and admires—of his family as well as of African American musicians, thinkers, scientists, and civil rights leaders. By telling his own stories and those of others, he becomes an artist.

Written and illustrated by his son, C. Ian White, and featuring full-color reproductions of Charles White’s own artworks, this deeply personal story traces the childhood influences that inspired young Charles to become an artist and a teacher.

Charles White (1918–1979) grew up and began his mature career in Chicago, making easel paintings and murals for the Works Progress Administration. Over the next four decades, he worked in vibrant cultural communities in New York, Mexico, and, finally, Los Angeles, creating images of African Americans that are often referred to as “images of dignity.”

C. Ian White is an artist and teacher who lives in Los Angeles with his wife, Virginia, and his son, Gordon. He is also the son of Charles White, a major figure in twentieth-century art. His own visual practice, which includes painting and sculpture, among other mediums, is influenced by the community of artists, musicians, actors, and activists in which he was raised. This is his first book for children.

Grandpa painted African Americans. He painted mothers, father, and children. He painted people who were enslaved, and the people who worked to free them. He painted writers, musicians, scientists, and leaders. He painted them marching and singing, thinking about freedom and working to make the world better.
Grandpa and the Library

How Charles White Learned to Paint

C. Ian White

The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Dad, where are we going?

We’re going to the library to see a mural painted by your Grandpa Charles.
How did Grandpa Charles become an artist? Did he start when he was very young? As young as me?

Even younger, Gordon. It started when Charles—my father—was about to turn five years old.

Gordon, look! The words on the mural say, “Love, hope, dignity, and education.” This is what he believed in, and this is what he wanted to share in his art.
Your Great-Grandma Marsh worked long days cleaning houses, and Charles was too old to go to work with her. There were no preschools or daycare centers when your grandpa was five, and babysitters were too expensive.

So she took him to the Chicago Public Library each morning with his lunch box. She reminded him to be polite, and then she went to work.

She left him at the library all day? Alone?

Yes, all day. Great-Grandma Marsh assured the librarian that her son was a very well-mannered young man who would sit nicely in the corner with his books.

And he did?
Yes, he did. Charles liked the library. It was quiet, like home. The librarians were strict, like his mother. He couldn’t read yet, but they gave him picture books about places he’d never been and the people who lived there.

He looked at the books and watched the clock on the wall, waiting for the big hand to reach twelve and the little hand to reach six. That was when Great-Grandma Marsh would come back.
Charles White was born in 1918, in Chicago, where in the 1930s he became a critical member of a budding community of African American artists. His career took him to New York, through the American South and Mexico, and ultimately to Los Angeles, where he lived and worked for more than twenty years. In all of these places, White contributed to the local art scenes and established ties with a range of creative people: writers, musicians, and performers as well as other visual artists. In addition to being a highly skilled draftsman, painter, and printmaker, he was a dedicated teacher, and he helped inspire and shape the careers of several generations of artists.

White made work that is figurative and representational, featuring images of African Americans drawn from history and tradition to reveal and celebrate their considerable, if often overlooked, accomplishments. His goal, he said, was “to make a very broad universal statement about the search for dignity, the search for a deeper understanding of the conflicts and contradictions of life... What I’m trying to do is talk about the history of humanity.” By the time of his death in 1979, White was widely admired for his “images of dignity” and his efforts to share his vision with the widest possible audience.

I look to the life of my people as the fountainhead of challenging scenes and monumental concepts.

—Charles White

This book is dedicated to my mother and father, Frances and Charles, to my wife, Virginia, and to my son, Gordon.

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