

## Meet Artist **JAVAKA STEPTOE**

“Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat” by artist and writer Javaka Steptoe won both the 2017 Caldecott Medal and the 2017 Coretta Scott King Illustration Award earlier this year. Javaka’s award-winning book celebrates the life and art of another young artist, but today he shares some of his own story with you.

Javaka Steptoe is having one busy year. Since winning the top prizes for the best-illustrated picture book in January, Javaka has been on the go. We caught up with him on his cell phone in New York City last month, fresh from a trip out to the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books where he read and signed copies of “Radiant Child” for fans. The biggest change in his life since winning the prestigious recognition is that “I’m a lot busier. I am pretty easily booked up until next year,” says Javaka, who will officially receive his Caldecott Medal next month at the summer conference of the American Library Association in Chicago.

Javaka says he wanted to introduce young readers to the powerful work and story of Jean-Michel Basquiat for many reasons. Javaka first became interested in the artist when he was younger, “in high school, and even more so in college.” And as Javaka writes in a note at the end of his book: “Most important, I hope that young readers will see that Basquiat’s artwork is more than just bright colors or intriguing composition or text. It is thoughtful, powerful, and interesting, and like all artwork, it is not something that is ‘good’ or ‘bad’. His art was his voice, which he used to speak about complex social issues and politics that are still relevant today.”

### JAVAKA’S STORY

Javaka, who grew up in Brooklyn, New York, says art was always part of his life. “I don’t remember when I started to create

art. It was just something that I always kind of knew,” shares Javaka. “I would just draw on my own and my parents (who were both artists) would be working...and if I had any questions or needed any supplies, I would just walk into the next room, wherever they were working, and ask them and they would give me what I needed and send me on my way.” He says following his own artistic path “was very natural, and totally my own decision.” But because his parents were artists, he did visit museums regularly and they also signed him up for art-based after school programs.

Javaka says growing up he had many other interests, including playing outside with friends, playing video games, watching TV, and going to the movies. There were always “other things happening in my life, in addition to art,” says Javaka. He feels that way today, too, adding that he loves to play pool, watch sports, go dancing, try new restaurants, and just enjoy life.

Javaka’s favorite school subjects were science, history, and sociology. He says he’s always felt that being an artist is very similar to being a scientist because you are “observing and exploring concepts and experimenting and seeing what can happen.”

After high school, Javaka earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City. And although he got his first book contract to illustrate “In Daddy’s Arms I Am Tall,” which won a Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award, while

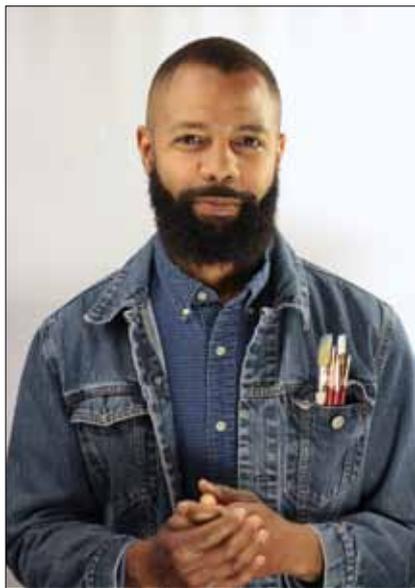
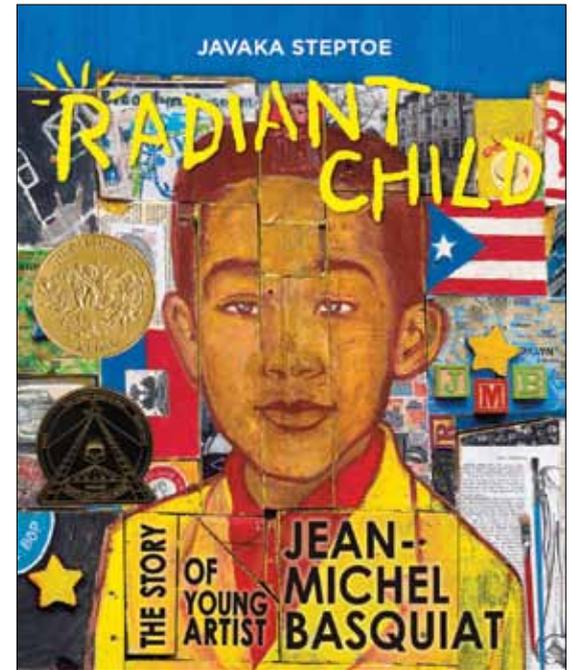


Photo Courtesy of Little, Brown and Company

**Artist and author Javaka Steptoe won the Caldecott, the top award for children’s book illustration, for his 13th book, “Radiant Child.”**



he was still at Cooper Union, it took time, persistence and several years of hard work to become a full-time artist. Javaka shared that he was a “bus boy” in college (a job where you clear tables at restaurants) and after graduating, took a job as an assistant teacher at a daycare center. At night, he worked on his art and book illustrations. “I was just kind of doing what everyone else does,” he says, as he began to establish his career as a children’s book artist. He says a good perspective he heard recently is that “making children’s books is something we do for love, and if we get to a point where we’re able to support our entire existence, that’s a great thing.” Javaka says he thinks that’s good advice for any career, adding you shouldn’t choose a career because you think you’ll make a lot of money, instead choose something you love to do and that passion will shine through and you’ll end up being successful.

Javaka’s passion is certainly shining through in a radiant, wonderful way.

By Janis Campbell

### FAST FACTS:

**Home life:** Javaka lives in Brooklyn, New York, with his cat, Midnight.

**Advice:** Do what you love and believe in yourself!

**Learn more:** Visit [www.Javaka.com](http://www.Javaka.com)