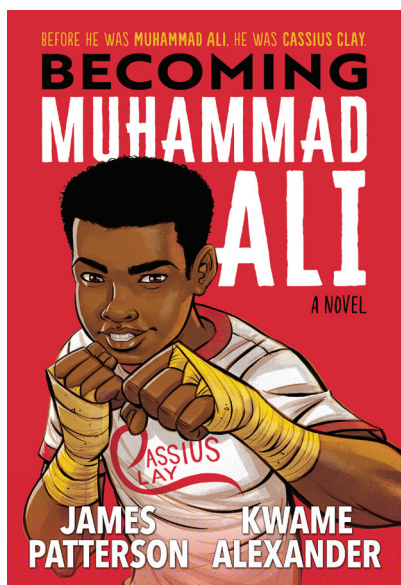


# Becoming Muhammad Ali

by James Patterson & Kwame Alexander



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## About the Book

Before he was a household name, Cassius Clay was a kid with struggles like any other. James Patterson and Kwame Alexander join forces to vividly depict his life up to age seventeen in both prose and verse, including his childhood friendships, struggles in school, the racism he faced, and his discovery of boxing. Readers will learn about Cassius's family and neighbors in Louisville, Kentucky, and how Cassius began training as an amateur boxer at age twelve. Before long, he won his first Golden Gloves bout and began his transformation into the unrivaled Muhammad Ali.

Fully authorized by and written in cooperation with the Muhammad Ali estate, *Becoming Muhammad Ali* dynamically captures the budding charisma and youthful personality of one of the greatest sports heroes of all time.

## About the Authors

**James Patterson** is the world's best-selling author, best known for his many enduring fictional characters and series, including Alex Cross, Michael Bennett, Maximum Ride, Middle School, I Funny, and Jacky Ha-Ha. Patterson's writing career is characterized by a single mission: to prove to everyone, from children to adults, that there is no such thing as a person who "doesn't like to read," only people who haven't found the right book.

He's given over a million books to schoolkids and donated over forty million dollars to support education, and endowed over five thousand college scholarships for teachers. He writes full-time and lives in Florida with his family. Learn more at [jamespatterson.com](http://jamespatterson.com).

**Kwame Alexander** is a poet, educator, and the *New York Times* best-selling author of more than thirty books, including his Newbery Medal-winning novel, *The Crossover*. Some of his other works include *Booked*, which was long-listed for the National Book Award, *The Playbook*, and *The Undefeated*, which was longlisted for the National Book Award and won the Caldecott Medal, a Newbery Honor, and the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award. He believes that poetry can change the world, and he uses it to inspire and empower young people around the world. Kwame is the founder of Versify, an imprint of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. [www.kwamealexander.com](http://www.kwamealexander.com), Twitter: @kwamealexander, Instagram: @kwamealexander

## Pre-Reading Activity

Discuss with students that this story is told in both prose and verse. Explain that it is also told from two different perspectives, the perspective of Lucky and the perspective of Cassius Clay.

## Historical Context

This is a biographical novel of Muhammad Ali. The story takes place during the civil rights movement. It will be helpful to provide background information about the civil rights movement. You can do this by introducing important people from and events that happened during the movement, and sharing speeches, videos, photographs, etc. Explain how the authors use this historical context in telling the story of *Becoming Muhammad Ali*. It will also be important to review definitions that will help students understand the historical context, such as segregation, racism, discrimination, injustice, boycotts, and protests. Creating discussion norms and classroom agreements will also be helpful in facilitating these conversations and tasks.

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## Discussion Questions

1. The first fight is described to the reader in “Cassius Clay vs. Alex Watt” (p. 6). This is the first fight of the 1958 Golden Gloves boxing tournament. The last fight Cassius fought in the tournament is described in “Cassius Clay vs. Kent Green” (p. 17). Reread these two poems and analyze them. Describe the similarities and differences between the two poems. Consider questions such as, how do the authors use figurative language in each poem? How do the authors describe Cassius in each poem? How do the authors describe Cassius’s opponents in each poem? Use evidence from your reading to support your responses.
2. In “Long Count,” when the referee is counting and reaches six, Cassius says, “I thought about / how boxing / was gonna set me free, / set us all free, and” (p. 12). What do you think Cassius means by this? What does freedom mean to you? Who has freedom? Who does not have freedom?
3. The poem “On the Phone with Lucky,” (p. 19) takes place after the 1958 Golden Gloves semifinals. What does this poem reveal about Cassius’s character? Use evidence from the text to support your response.
4. On page 22, Lucky describes going downtown with Cassius. He says, “And we kept our eyes wide open. Because going downtown meant crossing over into the white world. And in that world, four eyes were definitely better than two.” What does Lucky mean by this? What are your thoughts and/or questions about this quote? Why do you think the authors included this information?
5. In the poem, “Two Louisvilles” (p. 47), Granddaddy Herman explains to Rudy and Cassius that because of the color of their skin, there are some places they cannot go and some things they cannot do. Reread this poem and discuss the things they are unable to do. What is your reaction to this poem? During this time period, segregation was legal. This was an injustice. What are some injustices you see in the world today?
6. In the poem “Conversation with Granddaddy Herman” (p. 67), Granddaddy references a poem by Langston Hughes, when he says, “*Life ain’t no crystal stair*”. Read the poem “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes with a partner. Discuss with your partner what this poem means to you. What are your thoughts about the poem? What are your questions? Do you agree with the author that “*Life ain’t no crystal stair*”? Why or why not? Analyze how this poem connects to “Conversation with Granddaddy Herman.” How is it similar? How is it different? How does it connect to the broader story of *Becoming Muhammad Ali*? Be prepared to discuss your responses with the whole group.
7. What does the poem “I Was Twelve” (p. 91) reveal to the reader? If you were to write a poem about your age, what would you want people to know? Draft a list of things you would like to include and write a poem based on your current age.
8. In “Conversation with Lucky” (p. 172), Mr. Martin asks, “*What’s the best way to make a dream come true?*” How do characters in this story make their dreams come true? Find poems or passages to support your answers. What do you think it takes to make a dream come true?
9. Describe the relationship between Cassius and Rudy. How do the authors reveal this relationship to the reader through characters’ thoughts, actions, and words? Find poems or passages to support your response.
10. How does Cassius’s relationship with his grandfather impact his life? Why is this relationship important to him? Find poems or passages to support your response.
11. This story is told from Lucky’s and Cassius’s point of view. How do these different perspectives impact your reading and understanding of the story?
12. Lucky and Cassius are best friends. How are they similar? How are they different? Use poems or passages to support your analysis.

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13. What does Cassius mean in the poem “After” (p. 216) when he says, “Even though I won / the next few fights, I felt a / devastating loss”?
14. On page 255, Lucky says a reporter asked Cassius what he would like to be remembered for. Reread his response. What does Cassius mean by this? How would you answer this question? How do you want people to remember you?

### Important Quotes for Discussion

There are many meaningful quotes throughout the story. Read the quotes below and write your response to them. What do you think the quotes mean? Why are they important to the overall story?

Quote	What does this quote mean?	Do you agree or disagree? Why?	Why is this quote important to the overall story?
“Winners are not those / who never fail. / They are those / who never quit.” (p. 154)			
“The fight is won before you get in the ring.” (p. 187)			
“Can’t have delight if you don’t see the dark” (p. 225)			

Next, choose three quotes from the story you would like to discuss with your classmates. Why are these quotes important?

Quote	Why is this quote important?
1.	
2.	
3.	

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## Figurative Language

Some of the reasons authors use figurative language are to help their readers form mental images, to elicit emotion, and to make comparisons. Read the examples of figurative language found in *Becoming Muhammad Ali*. What does each example mean? How does it contribute to the overall meaning of the poem? How does it impact the mood of the poem?

Example of figurative language	Meaning	How does this contribute to the overall meaning of the poem?	How does this impact the mood of the poem?
“the heat / was punching me in the face / and the sweat dripped / like a waterfall.” (p. 134)			
“These fists I got are meteors, / super-hot, / burn you up like kilowatts, / knock you outta this world / like an astronaut.” (p. 262)			

Next, choose two examples of figurative language that stood out to you from the story. What does each example mean? Why did it stand out to you? How does it impact the mood of the poem?

Example of figurative language	Meaning	Why did it stand out to you?	How does this impact the mood of the poem?
1.			
2.			

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## Writing Activities

In the poem “Granddaddy Herman’s Living Room” (p. 25), we learn about a place that was special to Cassius. Read this poem again and discuss how the authors use figurative language to describe this place. Write a poem about one of your favorite places.

On page 28–29, there is a “Where I’m From” poem based on Cassius Clay. You can find many examples of “Where I’m From” poems online, including templates and examples based on George Ella Lyon’s original “Where I’m From” poem. Spend some time reading these example poems online and then write your own “Where I’m From” poem about yourself. Note to teacher: An extension to this assignment could be to have students write a “Where I’m From” poem from the perspective of another character in the book such as Rudy, Granddaddy Herman, Lucky or Teenie. An additional option could be to have students research one of the boxers mentioned (Sugar Ray, Jack Johnson, Sonny Liston, etc.) and create a “Where I’m From” poem from their perspective.

There are several conversation poems throughout the book, including “Conversation with Granddaddy Herman” (p. 67), “Conversation with Tall Bubba” (p. 78), “Conversation with Momma Bird” (p. 87), “Conversation with My Daddy” (p. 113), and “Conversation with Teenie” (p. 147). Review a few of these poems. How do they help you understand the story better? Why do you think the authors include these poems throughout the story? Write your own conversation poem based on a real or imaginary conversation between you and someone else about a topic that’s important to you.

In the poem “Tragedy” (p. 151) Cassius shares important events that happened all over the world the year his bike was stolen. Write a poem about important events happening around the world now. “Tragedy” is

about bad things that happened, but your poem doesn’t have to be. It can be about any events you choose.

From a young age Cassius had a dream of becoming a successful boxer. Throughout the story he reminds the reader of his dream in statements like “but this dream I got / is set in stone” (p. 19) and “then I collected / my winnings, / gave Rudy a quarter, / and spent the rest of the night / dreaming / of being in the ring one day” (p. 101). Lucky also says, “We all dreamed about the future. But I think Cassius really, truly *saw* it” (p. 93). In order to achieve this dream, Cassius trained diligently and remained focused on this goal. What are some of your dreams? Write them down in order of importance or in the sequence in which you would like to achieve them. Next to each dream, write your plan for achieving it. Write a letter to yourself about your dreams and your plans. Keep this letter to refer to as you begin to accomplish your dreams.

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## Research Activities

The events in this story take place during the civil rights movement. The authors give us insight into how this time period impacted the characters and the injustices they experienced specific to racism. Some of these examples can be found below. Review these examples in the text and record how Cassius responds to them along with your personal response. Note to teacher: You could extend this assignment by asking students to find additional examples of racism in the text and complete the chart based on the examples they find on their own.

Examples of racism in <i>Becoming Muhammad Ali</i>	Cassius's response	My personal response
<i>Whites Only</i> signs (p. 23)		
Cassius and Rudy's attempted visit to Fontaine Ferry Park (pp. 44–45)		
Cassius, Rudy, and Lucky's interaction with the white men in the car (pp. 56–57)		

As we see from this text, during the civil rights movement Black people faced discrimination based on the color of their skin. For example, they faced issues of segregation in schools, stores, public transportation, and housing. Black people resisted these injustices through boycotts, protests, marches, etc. in an effort to gain justice and liberation. The authors of this story reveal some of these injustices and some of the important people involved. Now you will have an opportunity to learn more through your own research.

- Choose a person or group of people (such as the Little Rock Nine or the Greensboro Four) from the civil rights movement to research. Using credible digital and print resources, you will learn about how people and events contributed to the civil rights movement. Be sure to explore important speeches, poems, videos, etc. that will help you in your research. Research important background information about your chosen person or group.
- Consider how you will introduce your subject in your presentation. What did this person or group set out to accomplish during this time? Were they successful? Why or why not? What did it mean for this person or group to be Black in America at this time?
- As you conduct your research, also consider the barriers that were in place for people fighting for justice. How did your chosen person or group overcome these barriers? What or who created these barriers? Are these barriers still in place today? If so, what needs to happen in order for these barriers to be removed?
- Choose a way to present your findings. You can create a multimedia presentation, oral presentation, or a written paper. At the end of your project write a reflection that describes how things are now in our country compared to how they were during the civil rights movement. What has changed? What has stayed the same?
- Note to teacher: You may want to provide a list of people and groups from the civil rights movement to help guide students' choices for this assignment.

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At the end of the book, we learn that during the time Muhammad Ali's boxing title and license were taken from him, he focused on racial justice. Once he retired from boxing, he helped to raise money for famine victims, fought to get American hostages released from Iraq, and raised millions of dollars for medical research. These issues were important to him and he wanted to make a difference.

- Make a list of issues that are important to you. Choose one issue from your list to research.
- Begin by researching what has been done in your community or more broadly to address this issue. Are there already people working to solve this problem? What has been accomplished so far? What still needs to be done? What actions can you take to address this issue?
- We see in the story that Ali not only acknowledged that there were problems, but also worked on finding ways to solve them. Create an action plan that focuses on how you can bring awareness to this issue. Share what has already been done to address this issue, what still needs to be done, and what you can do to address now.

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