



## The Amazing Age of John Roy Lynch

*Chris Barton , Don Tate (Illustrator)*

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## **The Amazing Age of John Roy Lynch** Chris Barton , Don Tate (Illustrator)

John Roy Lynch spent most of his childhood as a slave in Mississippi, but all of that changed with the Emancipation Proclamation. Suddenly people like John Roy could have paying jobs and attend school. While many people in the South were unhappy with the social change, John Roy thrived in the new era. He was appointed to serve as justice of the peace and was eventually elected into the United States Congress. This biography, with its informative backmatter and splendid illustrations, gives readers an in-depth look at the Reconstruction period through the life of one of the first African-American congressmen.

## **The Amazing Age of John Roy Lynch Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Amazing Age of John Roy Lynch for online ebook**

### **Margie says**

Every single time I read a biography, especially a picture book biography; I am truly astounded at the capacity of the human spirit. My purpose in placing emphasis on picture book biographies is those authors and illustrators search for the essence of each person, specific points of interest, given their limited page space. No matter the circumstances of these individuals, they all have a can-do attitude. Their lives serve to inspire others.

In reading *The Amazing Age of John Roy Lynch* (Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, April 1, 2015) written by Chris Barton with illustrations by Don Tate with every page turn I could feel myself cheering on this man. In any given situation, he found a way to move forward. He searched for opportunities, making them work for his life's goal. There is a reason the word amazing appears in the title.

My full recommendation: <http://librariansquest.blogspot.com/2...>

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### **Missy says**

In 1875, US Representative John Roy Lynch (R-MS) proclaimed in support of the civil rights bill:

When every man, woman, and child can feel and know that his, her, and their rights are fully protected by the strong arm of a generous and grateful Republic, then we can truthfully say that this beautiful land of ours, over which the Star Spangled Banner so triumphantly waves, is in truth and in fact, the “land of the free and the home of the brave.”

I found it remarkable that Rep Lynch included women and children in his statement; that seemed very forward thinking only six years after African-American men were granted suffrage and more than 40 years before women would be given the right to vote.

What is truly remarkable about Rep. Lynch is that he gave this speech only 25 years after he had been born into slavery.

*The Amazing Age of John Roy Lynch*, written by Chris Barton and illustrated by Don Tate, relates the remarkable life of a man who made his way from working as a slave in the fields of Tacony Plantation in Louisiana, to serving as a member of the Mississippi House of Representatives and the US House of Representatives.

Once again, a children's picture book biography has introduced me to an important and inspiring person who had not been part of my earlier education. The entire period of Reconstruction is often glossed over or skimmed through after the tumultuous era of the Civil War. Barton and Tate provide an accurate, unsentimental, yet child-appropriate look at the life of a man who was born into slavery, rose to achievement in the Reconstruction era, and ultimately faced oppression of Jim Crow laws and racial discrimination until

his death in 1939.

For an excellent description of the writing and illustration, I point to the review by Betsy Bird, children's literature guru and local (Evanston) librarian.

After reading a picture book biography or a historical fiction, I like to search the online newspaper archives from that period to see if I can find articles that relate to the person or event. I was delighted to find that Rep. John Roy Lynch continued to succeed and serve the nation after leaving politics as a member of the US Army during the Spanish-American War. I found articles in four Midwestern newspapers from August 1901, announcing Lynch's appointment by President McKinley to captain and assistant paymaster, the first African-American man commissioned for staff duty.

*The Amazing Age of John Roy Lynch* is a great introduction for children and adults to a man whose life of service merits appreciation and celebration to this day.

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### **Kimberly says**

Excellent, excellent youth nonfiction. A young person may not fully appreciate how special Lynch's story is, but as an adult I was fascinated. I had no idea that this period of African American advancement had taken place during Reconstruction. The historical note in the back is fascinating, and more than a little sad. From 1870-1877 there were SIXTEEN African American serving in the US Congress! Between 1902 and 1972? Zero. Talk about two steps forward and ten steps back.

Lynch's story is one worth reading about, and I hope to check out his autobiography in the future.

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### **Tasha says**

John Roy Lynch grew up as a slave in Mississippi, the son of an overseer who tried to free his children from slavery. Unfortunately, his untimely death led to them continuing to be enslaved until the Emancipation Proclamation. Lynch found a job, his first paying job, on a steamer ship and worked his way up. At age 17, John Roy went to work for a photographer whose studio was right across from a school. Listening in on the classes and attending night school, John Roy was able to learn to write eloquent letters. He also started being active in politics, buying land, and speaking out. He was appointed Justice of the Peace at age 21. Soon he was elected as the Mississippi Speaker of the House and then in 1872, he became the first African-American US Congressman. Throughout, John Roy Lynch spoke to the needs of the people he represented and the importance of civil rights for all.

Barton provides just enough information for children to understand the time period and the implications of the Emancipation Proclamation. This look at the Reconstruction Period offers a view of an important time in American history, one that is often overlooked in children's books. The amazing fortitude and resilience of John Roy Lynch keeps this book moving as his own life progresses forward in unexpected ways. Clearly it is his intelligence and gift for communication that carries Lynch forward into a very different life than others around him. More information on Lynch is offered in the final pages of the book with a complete timelines and bibliography.

The illustrations by Tate are done with a light touch, creating a book that depicts darker subjects at time but also infusing the book with a sense of hope and wonder. This makes a book covering such a heavy topic as well as such an important part of history much more appealing and approachable.

An important book focused on an important figure in a dynamic time in American history, this picture book biography will inform new audiences about the potential for both progress and defeat during the Restoration. Appropriate for ages 7-10.

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### **Jill says**

This story of John Roy Lynch, the first African-American speaker of the Mississippi House of Representatives, is a terrific book for several reasons. The most important is, the author actually gets the story of the Reconstruction Era correct. While many Americans know a lot about the Civil War, the great majority don't know much about Reconstruction, and what they have learned is riddled with myth and inaccuracies. As historian Eric Foner points out, we are still dealing with many of the same issues today as we did during this time period, making it all the more critical that we are aware of what actually happened. Chris Barton does a great job not only in presenting the truth, but in doing so in a way that will be understandable to younger readers.

Another reason this book stands out is because of John Roy Lynch himself, whose story is pretty amazing. Lynch, his mother, and brother were slaves, but were about to be bought and thereby liberated by his white father in 1849 when the father became sick and died. The father had entrusted a friend to complete the process, but the "friend" just sold the family to a new owner.

John Roy's new job was to serve the owner's wife by such chores as fanning her and shooing flies from her food. On Sundays, he and the other slaves listened to sermons about doing their master's will. But John Roy spoke out of place one day, and was sent across the river in 1862 to work in the swampy cotton fields. But by then the Civil War had started, and when the Yankees came to Mississippi, John Roy experienced "true emancipation" when he sold a chicken for a dime and bought a boat ride to Natchez.

After the war ended, Mississippi whites, like those in other parts of the South, began passing laws to incarcerate as many young black men as they could; in essence, re-enslaving them to use their manpower as before. The labor of prisoners was bought and sold by *sheriffs* and *judges* among other opportunists to corporations such as U.S. Steel, Tennessee Coal, railroads, lumber camps, and factories. The prisoners who were sent to mines were chained to their barracks at night, and required to work all day. Hundreds died of disease, accidents, or homicide, and in fact, mass burial fields near these old mines can still be located. (You can read about this in the excellent 2008 book by Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery By Another Name*.)

John Roy managed to escape "recapture" by becoming a messenger for a local portrait shop, and was soon running it himself. He went to night school to learn to read and write, and got involved in the Natchez Republican club.

In 1868 the new U.S. Government-appointed Governor of Mississippi named John Roy Justice of the Peace, and John Roy hastened to learn law. He then got elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives, which chose John Roy as Speaker of the House. He was still only twenty-four years old. In 1872, voters sent him to the U.S. House of Representatives. His own success belied the fact that there was still plenty of resistance to black advancement in the South, and violence by whites steadily increased. John Roy, however, continued

throughout his long life to believe in the power of law to bring peace and justice.

John Roy Lynch's story is followed by a timeline, an Author's Note, Illustrator's note, a list of references for further reading, and a map.

Illustrator Don Tate chose a "childlike, naive style of art," as he explains in his note, in the hope that the more lighthearted style would help temper the harsh aspects of the story. I think he made a great decision. His watercolors are also framed in sepia, helping establish the historical nature of the story.

**Evaluation:** "Black history" has been dominated for so long by a very few figures, that it is great to see authors bringing attention to new trailblazers and role models. And as mentioned above, it is always very gratifying when an author does his or her research, and is not reluctant to figure out ways to share essential aspects of American history with younger ears.

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### **Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says**

What an amazing man John Roy Lynch was! A half Irish slave who was freed by the Emancipation Proclamation, John Roy held a number of jobs, bought property, held the office of Justice of the Peace, and served in the Mississippi House of Representatives, all before he was 30 years old. Though he had no formal education, he taught himself to read and write, and then educated himself in law and politics. He must have been highly intelligent. I liked the way Barton related the history of Reconstruction through the life of John Roy, and why it ultimately failed. As he states in his author's note, most Americans know little about this period in our history, so this is an important book for young readers. I have read books and seen an excellent documentary about Reconstruction, so I know something about it; nevertheless, I was astonished when I read in the historical note at the back of the book:

"Most notably, between 1870 and 1877, there were sixteen African Americans who served in the U.S. Congress from former Confederate states. But there were only six more who served between 1878 and 1901. And between 1902 and 1972, there were zero. What happened?"

That underscores how badly Reconstruction failed.

I also liked Don Tate's illustrations. In his illustrator's note he states that he did a lot of research beforehand, and decided to use "a rather childlike, naive style of art—even whimsical" for such a serious subject for young readers. I think he hit it just right.

I can't recommend this book highly enough. John Roy Lynch is a fascinating fellow from a period in our history that young and old should know more about.

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### **The Reading Countess says**

Interesting tale about a determined young man who rose quickly in the ranks of Reconstruction politics as a half-Irish, recent slave. Though the author certainly makes valid points throughout, I wish he would have left out his obvious feelings-kids are smart. They can come to his conclusions without the nudging. The

illustrations are rich and well-researched.

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### **Samuel Graham says**

Barton does some fierce truth telling and does not skip over harsh realities of the Reconstruction era. Students will learn here that there was more to the end of slavery than Abraham Lincoln passing the Emancipation Proclamation. The text and illustrations depict whipping, hanging, and a black church burning down at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan. However, there is also a lot of hope in the story of John Roy Lynch's rise from slave to U.S. congressman in a 10-year span, which I think is what makes this book work without being overwhelmingly gloomy for children.

Barton and illustrator Don Tate are thorough in their work, as indicated by the several support tools available at the end of the book, including a timeline, historical note, author's note, illustrator's note, map of reconstruction states, and suggestions for further reading. All of these are invaluable tools for a teacher considering this text for classroom use. In fact, I think this book would work well in the middle elementary classroom and beyond.

One note that I must mention: There is a repeated line that bothered me and kept me from a 5-star rating. Barton says that Lynch's master banished him to hard labor on the plantation because she felt "rage and spite and hurt" after Lynch said her sister had lied. Yes, *hurt*. To me this comes off as an excuse for her behavior. The author then says that leaders of the south also felt "rage and spite and hurt" after Lincoln was elected president, and therefore seceded from the Union. The use of the word "hurt" comes across to me as justification for great evils. I would love to know why he chose that word, but in the meantime it has left me unsettled.

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### **Kirsten Whisler says**

This story was extremely interesting and it taught me a lot about history that I didn't know. John Roy Lynch had to go through a lot of struggles and he overcame a lot but he didn't quite get to see his dreams come true. I would suggest this book for older students rather than early childhood education.

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### **Elizabeth says**

Another Bluebonnet Nominee. My 9 & 7 year olds were fascinated and so was I. It does a great job of discussing the topics of slavery, civil war (only one page of it), reconstruction and race relations in the American South in kid friendly terms without dumbing it down. My kids had several questions during the reading. And I think we need a few more times through to do it service.

I normally don't review picture books but this one is good enough I want to get the word out. The author and illustrator both live in Austin (though I hadn't heard of either before).

Randomly (?) three things about reconstruction have been in front of me in the past couple of weeks, none by my direct choice. 1. This children's BB book, that we are going through all of them and this is one the library had on the shelf while we were there. 2. An adult book The Strange Career of William Henry Ellis, the Texas Slave who became a Mexican Millionaire, which a friend recommended for book club. 3. Stuff You Missed in History class current podcast.

Wow, so much of history we never learn or conveniently forget....

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### **Samantha says**

A picture book bio of sorts about John Roy Lynch who was born into slavery, but within ten years went from field slave to U.S. Congressman. The tail end of slavery thru Reconstruction is covered. The time period is of major focus whereas John Roy Lynch serves as a tour guide/access point for presenting information about the trials of Reconstruction.

While I think the topic is important for sharing with youth, overall I wasn't impressed with the writing. The narrative often took on a strange slant in discussing what Lynch did (i.e. "John Roy Lynch might have been free by the time he was two. Bust he was not.") This technique only served to confuse me as it told me the opposite of what happened and caused me to reason what did happen; a strange approach to biography writing.

Additionally, the text reads with a definite bias. I think the text would've read as stronger for me if the author had chosen to show instead of tell the reader; the reader would've easily seen the horrors of Reconstruction if they had the straight facts about the atrocities African Americans faced during that time period. I didn't like thinking about what the author's view of his subject was with every turn of phrase.

Back matter consists of a historical note, timeline, author/illustrator's note, further reading section, and a map of the U.S. during Reconstruction.

Mixed media, gouache, and ink artwork appeals to a younger crowd than the text is directed at. Grades 4-6.

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### **Betsy says**

"It's the story of a guy who in ten years went from teenage field slave to U.S. Congressman." Come again? That's the pitch author Chris Barton pulled out when he wanted to describe this story to others. You know, children's book biographies can be very easy as long as you cover the same fifteen to twenty people over and over again. And you could forgive a child for never imagining that there were remarkable people out there beyond Einstein, Tubman, Jefferson, and Sacajawea. People with stories that aren't just unknown to kids but to whole swaths of adults as well. So I always get kind of excited when I see someone new out there. And I get extra especially excited when the author involved is Chris Barton. Here's a guy who performed original research to write a picture book biography of the guys who invented Day-Glo colors (The Day-Glo Brothers) so you know you're in safe hands. The inclusion of illustrator Don Tate was not something I would have thought up myself, but by gum it turns out that he's the best possible artist for this story! Tackling what turns out to be a near impossible task (explaining Reconstruction to kids without plunging them into the depths of despair), this keen duo present a book that reads so well you're left wondering not just how they managed to pull it off, but if anyone else can learn something from their technique.

From birth until the age of sixteen John Roy Lynch was a slave. The son of an overseer who died before he could free his family, John Roy began life as a house slave but was sent to the fields when his high-strung mistress made him the brunt of her wrath. Not long after, The Civil War broke out and John Roy bought himself a ride to Natchez and got a job. He started out as a waiter than moved on to pantryman,

photographer, and in time orator and even Justice of the Peace. Then, at twenty-four years of age, John Roy Lynch was elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives where he served as Speaker of the House. The year was 1869, and these changes did not pass without incident. Soon an angry white South took its fury out on its African American population and the strides that had been made were rescinded violently. John Roy Lynch would serve out two terms before leaving office. He lived to a ripe old age, dying at last in 1939. A Historical Note, Timeline, Author's Note, Illustrator's Note, Bibliography of books "For Further Reading", and map of John's journey and the Reconstructed United States circa 1870 appear at the end.

How do you write a book for children about a time when things were starting to look good and then plummeted into bad for a very very long time? I think kids have this perception (oh heck, a bunch of adults too) that we live in the best of all possible worlds. For example, there's a children's book series called *Infinity Ring* where the basic premise is that bad guys have gone and changed history and now it's up to our heroes to put everything back because, obviously, this world we live in right now is the best. Simple, right? Their first adventure is to make sure Columbus "discovers" America so . . . yup. Too often books for kids reinforce the belief that everything that has happened has to have happened that way. So when we consider how few books really discuss Reconstruction, it's not exactly surprising. Children's books are distinguished, in part, by their capacity to inspire hope. What is there about Reconstruction to cause hope at all? And how do you teach that to kids?

Barton's solution is clever because rather than write a book about Reconstruction specifically, he's found a historical figure that guides the child reader effortlessly through the time period. Lynch's life is perfect for every step of this process. From slavery to a freedom that felt like slavery. Then slow independence, an education, public speaking, new responsibilities, political success, two Congressional terms, and then an entirely different life after that (serving in the Spanish-American War as a major, moving to Chicago, dying). Barton shows his rise and then follows his election with a two-page spread of KKK mayhem, explaining that the strides made were taken back "In a way, the Civil War wasn't really over. The battling had not stopped." And after quoting a speech where Lynch proclaims that America will never be free until "every man, woman, and child can feel and know that his, her, and their rights are fully protected by the strong arm of a generous and grateful Republic," Barton follows it up with, "If John Roy Lynch had lived a hundred years (and he nearly did), he would not have seen that come to pass." Barton guides young readers to the brink of the good and then explains the bad, giving context to just how long the worst of it continued. He also leaves it up to them to determine if Lynch's dream has come to fruition or not (classroom debate time!).

And he plays fair. These days I read nonfiction picture books with my teeth clenched. Why? Because I've started holding them to high standards (doggone it). And there are so many moments in this book that could have been done incorrectly. Heck, the first image you see when you open it up is of John Roy Lynch's family, his white overseer father holding his black wife tenderly as their kids stand by. I saw it and immediately wondered how we could believe that Lynch's parents ever cared for one another. Yet a turn of the page and Barton not only puts Patrick Lynch's profession into context ("while he may have loved *these* slaves, he most likely took the whip to others") but provides information on how he attempted to buy his wife and children. Later there is some dialogue in the book, as when Lynch's owner at one point joshes with him at the table and John Roy makes the mistake of offering an honest answer. Yet the dialogue is clearly taken from a text somewhere, not made up to fit the context of the book. I loathe faux dialogue, mostly because it's entirely unnecessary. Barton shows clearly that one need never rely upon it to make a book exemplary.

Finally, you just have to stand in awe of Barton's storytelling. Not making up dialogue is one thing. Drawing a natural link between a life and the world in which that life lived is another entirely. Take that moment when John Roy answers his master honestly. He's banished to hard labor on a plantation after his master's

wife gets angry. Then Barton writes, “She was not alone in rage and spite and hurt and lashing out. The leaders of the South reacted the same way to the election of a president – Abraham Lincoln – who was opposed to slavery.” See how he did that? He managed to bring the greater context of the times in line with John Roy’s personal story. Many is the clunky picture book biography that shoehorns in the era or, worse, fails to mention it at all. I much preferred Barton’s methods. There’s an elegance to them.

I’ve been aware of Don Tate for a number of years. No slouch, the guy’s illustrated numerous children’s books, and even wrote (but didn’t illustrate) one that earned him an Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Honor Award (*It Jes’ Happened: When Bill Traylor Started to Draw*). His is a seemingly simple style. I wouldn’t exactly call it cartoony, but it is kid friendly. Clear lines. Open faces. His watercolors go for honesty and clarity and do not come across as particularly evocative. But I hadn’t ever seen the man do nonfiction, I’ll admit. And while it probably took me a page or two to understand, once I realized why Don Tate was the perfect artist for “John Roy Lynch” it all clicked into place. You see, books about slavery for kids usually follow a prescribed pattern. Some of them go for hyperrealism. Books with art by James Ransome, Eric Velasquez, Floyd Cooper, or E.B Lewis all adhere closely to this style. Then there are the books that are a little more abstract. Books with art by R. Gregory Christie, for example, traipse closely to art worthy of Jacob Lawrence. And Shane W. Evans has a style that’s significantly artistic. A more cartoony style is often considered too simplistic for the heavy subject matter or, worse, disrespectful. But what are we really talking about here? If the book is going to speak honestly about what slavery really was, the subjugation of whole generations of people, then art that hews closely to the truth is going to be too horrific for kids. You need someone who can cushion the blow, to a certain extent. It isn’t that Tate is shying away from the horrors. But when he draws it it loses some of its worst terrors. There is one two-page spread in this book that depicts angry whites whipping and lynching their black neighbors. It’s not shown as an exact moment in time, but rather a composite of events that would have happened then. And there’s something about Tate’s style that makes it manageable. The whip has not yet fallen and the noose has not yet been placed around a neck, but the angry mobs are there and you know that the worst is imminent. Most interesting to me too is that far in the background a white woman and her two children just stand there, neither approving nor condemning the action. I think you could get a very good conversation out of kids about this family. What are they feeling? Whose side are they on? Why don’t they do something?

And Tate has adapted his style, you can see. Compare the heads and faces in this book to those in one of his earlier books like, *Ron’s Big Mission* by Rose Blue, in this one he modifies the heads, making them a bit smaller, in proportion with the rest of the body. I was particularly interested in how he did faces as well. If you watch Lynch’s face as a child and teen it’s significant how he keeps his features blank in the presence of white people. Not expressionless, but devoid of telltale thoughts. As a character, the first time he smiles is when he finally has a job he can be paid for. With its silhouetted moments, good design sense, tapered but not muted color palette, and attention to detail, Mr. Tate puts his all into what is by far his most sophisticated work to date.

This year rage erupted over the fact that the Confederate flag continues to fly over the South Carolina statehouse grounds. To imagine that the story Barton relates here does not have immediate applications to contemporary news is facile. As he mentions in his Author’s Note, “I think it’s a shame how little we question why the civil rights movement in this country occurred a full century following the emancipation of the slaves rather than immediately afterward.” So as an author he found an inspiring, if too little known, story of a man who did something absolutely astounding. A story that every schoolchild should know. If there’s any justice in the universe, after reading this book they will. Reconstruction done right. Nonfiction done well.

For ages 5-8.

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### **Mary says**

John Roy Lynch was born to a white father and enslaved mother, therefore he was born a slave. A beautiful picture book that tells Lynch's story from slave to politician during the Reconstruction. This inspiring biography gives a no nonsense description to the racism of the times. There are two disturbing double page illustrations that may give readers pause: one of a man tied to a tree about to be whipped, and later one of Ku Klux Klan's members burning a church. This little known story with the additional information about Reconstruction and reading list will be an important resource for young readers learning about this period of American history.

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### **Edward Sullivan says**

A wonderfully written and illustrated portrait of a fascinating individual in the context of an unflinchingly honest depiction of the promise and failure of the Reconstruction era. Engaging, insightful and rich.

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### **Kara says**

The protagonist of this picture book biography, John Roy Lynch, who went from a slave to a U.S. Congressman in 10 years time, is one worth knowing, and I'm glad there's now a picture book to introduce him to kids. But what I am truly wowed by is how successfully Chris Barton conveyed the bigger picture of Reconstruction (a time period which most of us don't know nearly enough about). He does so in a way that is simple enough for kids to understand but which doesn't gloss over the unpleasant realities.

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