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Picture Books

The Last Black King of the Kentucky Derby
Crystal Hubbard
Robert McGuire, illustrator
Lee and Low Books
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Isaac Murphy, Willie Simms, Jimmy "Wink" Winkfield: few people recognize these names or know they were victorious black jockeys. Winkfield, the subject of this book, was born in 1882 in Kentucky, and started riding horses at sixteen. He eventually won two consecutive Kentucky Derbies: one in 1901 while riding His Eminence and the other in 1902 while riding Alan-a-Dale. Robert McGuire, who has illustrated biographies of Frederick Douglass and Amelia Earhart, uses oil paintings to depict jockeys on horses racing toward the finish line. A moving illustration shows a teary-eyed Winkfield sitting triumphantly upon His Eminence, as the crowd cheers behind him.

After two major victories, "Wink was a genuine star…[and] he was feeling confident when he mounted a horse named Early in the Kentucky Derby on May 2, [1903]." Though "Wink could almost taste victory," he won second place, and failed to earn the third consecutive win he was hoping for. Racism, segregation, and the decline of interest in the sport drove black jockeys away from American horse racing, resulting in Winkfield's longtime distinction as the last black jockey to win the Kentucky Derby.

In an afterword, the author, a 2006 Amelia Bloomer Project Award winner, explains that Winkfield was eventually honored for his accomplishments. This book, with its informative introduction, is a teaching tool for children eight to ten years old that can be used to discuss an overlooked part of American history. Perhaps one day someone else will earn Winkfield's crown.

Kaavonia Hinton