

Emily Arnold McCully

A
PROMISING
LIFE



Coming of Age with America
A Novel



ARTHUR A. LEVINE BOOKS

An Imprint of Scholastic Inc.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: McCully, Emily Arnold, author.

Title: A promising life : coming of age with America : a novel /
Emily Arnold McCully.

Description: First edition. | New York, NY : Arthur A. Levine Books, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., 2017. | Summary: All his life Jean Baptiste Charbonneau, son of Sacagawea and a French fur-trapper, has lived in two worlds: the Westernized world of his godfather, William Clark, and the frontier world beyond St. Louis—but he is troubled by the way Americans mistreat tribes like the Osage, Arikara, and Mandan, and as a man of mixed ancestry, he must ultimately choose which of the two heritages is more important to him. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016051805 | ISBN 9780439314459 (hardcover : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Charbonneau, Jean-Baptiste, 1805-1866—Juvenile fiction. | Clark, William, 1770-1838—Juvenile fiction. | Racially mixed people—United States—Juvenile fiction. | Explorers—United States—Juvenile fiction. | West (U.S.)—History—19th century—Juvenile fiction. | Saint Louis (Mo.)—History—19th century—Juvenile fiction. | CYAC: Charbonneau, Jean-Baptiste, 1805-1866—Fiction. | Clark, William, 1770-1838—Fiction. | Racially mixed people—Fiction. | Indians of North America—Fiction. | Saint Louis (Mo.)—History—19th century—Fiction. | West (U.S.)—History—19th century—Fiction. | LCGFT: Biographical fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.M13913 Pr 2017 | DDC 813.54 [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016051805>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 17 18 19 20 21

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, August 2017

Book design by Carol Ly

CHAPTER ONE



The Mandan Villages, 1810

First, Baptiste heard muffled gunfire, then furious drumming. It meant the boats were finally arriving, bringing the Mandan chief back home from Washington City, where he had met the Great White Father. Soon Baptiste and his parents would board one of those boats and it would take them away from the Mandan Villages and down the river. His mother had told him over and over that it would happen. He had begged her to tell him what it would be like in St. Louis. But Sakakawea had no stories of the future. All she would say was that Captain Clark would raise him.

A weak sun hung low in the sky. The autumn wind howled, sweeping in and around the clay mounds along the shore, bending bare trees toward the ground. Baptiste ran all the way from the top bluffs, where he liked to stand, his arms spread wide, and pretend he could fly, swooping zigzag down the steep slopes to where the flotilla spread nearly the breadth of the frigid river. Almost everyone in the Mandan and Hidatsa villages was streaming down to the shore. Those who didn't were perched on the domed roofs of their lodges to watch from afar.

Baptiste found his mother in the crowd. She was shaking her head. "Our neighbors are peaceful people. They think they live at the heart of the world and strangers will come to trade in peace, as

before. But the world is changing.” She held him close. He breathed in the familiar smell of her leather tunic and the beaver castor perfume she wore.

Ever since he could remember, Baptiste’s mother had told him that he would go to live with Captain Clark, who chose him because he was special. She said that Clark had called him a promising boy. It meant that one day he might do important things in his life. Clark had asked to prepare him for this future. “Destiny” was a blurry thing, though. Sakakawea said he must be patient. *Only with time will you understand who you are meant to be.*

BAPTISTE AND HIS parents, Sakakawea and Toussaint—a Shoshone woman and a French interpreter—boarded the lead boat. Baptiste studied his mother’s broad face. This was another uprooting for her. She had been just a child when she was stolen away from her people by the Hidatsa, then sold to Baptiste’s father, the French Canadian Toussaint Charbonneau. Baptiste and his parents had gone all the way to the great western ocean with Captains Lewis and Clark! There, at Fort Clatsop, one of them, Captain Clark, had grown so fond of Baptiste that he asked to raise him as his son.

For weeks, Toussaint bragged about how he had gone to St. Louis years ago, when it was Spanish. But when Baptiste peppered him with questions, he said only “Wait and see” or “Some of their houses are made of stone. They’re made to stay put.”

Men with stern faces and long rifles lined the decks of the boats. Baptiste met one man’s eyes. Their blue depths were cold. No one had given him such a look in his life. Everyone in the

villages knew him and liked him. He didn't flinch from the man's stare.

His mother beckoned and he scampered to her side. She was wearing her fine antelope shift, embellished with elk teeth and intricately woven dyed quills, a beaded belt, and leggings. She had folded the top of her buffalo robe to show her long hair with its daubing of red clay. She was beautiful!

At last, they were on their way! His friends on the shore wagged their fingers and made sad faces. His puppy ran in circles around them, yipping with confused excitement. When the boats were launched, the boys trotted alongside until they could no longer keep up. Their cries were snatched by the cutting wind.