



THE ACTOR,
DIRECTOR,
PODCASTER AND
READING ADVOCATE
RECEIVES THE LA PRESS CLUB'S
DISTINGUISHED STORYTELLER
AWARD

LISTENING to LeVar

BY SARAH KROUSE

In nearly 50 years of performances, LeVar Burton has explored the world of literature, enslavement, the Black experience in America, and even the stars.

He has acted, directed, podcasted, been a game show host, authored a novel and advocated for an end to book bans. Yet for all of the varied genres and formats Burton has inhabited, he feels most at home reading aloud.

"There's something really magical about that for me. It's even more ephemeral than the theater in terms of creating a moment of community with an audience," he said.

Burton, 66, has connected readers, viewers and listeners across generations with books, first as the host of PBS show "Reading Rainbow" from 1983 to 2006, and later on his short fiction-focused podcast "LeVar Burton Reads." The show, launched in 2017, also became a live tour.

Tonight, Burton is receiving the Los Angeles Press Club's Distinguished Storyteller Award for Excellence in Storytelling Outside Journalism. It honors the breadth of his work, the range of audiences he has reached and the positive impact he has had on child literacy.

Born in West Germany and raised in California, Burton spent his childhood aspiring to become a Catholic priest. During his teen years at seminary school, Burton realized he craved a different kind of storytelling.

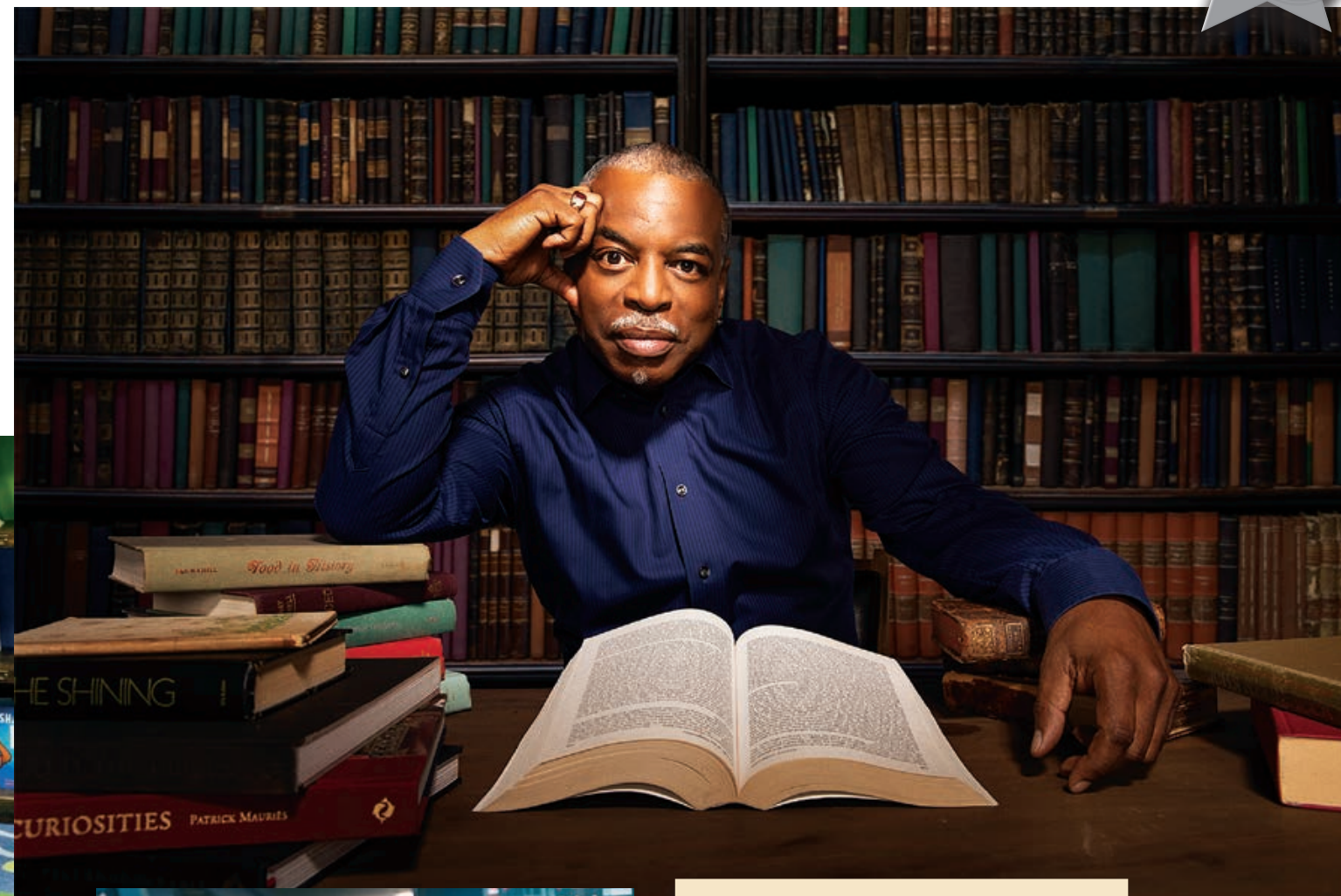
"I wanted to be in the world," he said. He recalled thinking, "There's a whole world out there that



I know nothing about and I want to know everything I can about it, and I'm not going to be able to do it by putting on a collar and living this sort of specialized existence."

He landed his first major acting role as an enslaved Gambian man brought to America in the 1977 miniseries "Roots." He was 19 and earned an Emmy nomination. From there, Burton said, he had the opportunity to be more selective in the acting jobs he pursued.

He started hosting the PBS children's show "Reading Rainbow," becoming a warm presence for young people and a guide through the vast universe of books. His hosting and producing work on the show earned a dozen daytime Emmys and a Peabody Award.



Far left: Burton is now Lt. Commander Geordi La Forge in *Star Trek Picard* with daughter Mica playing his daughter Alandra La Forge.

Left: Burton with his mother.

LeVar Burton has a long history of actively promoting literacy among children and feels connected when reading aloud. Burton's first major acting role was when he was cast in the miniseries, "Roots."

Early in his career Burton didn't view himself as particularly well suited to make content for kids, but after more than two decades of hosting "Reading Rainbow," he occupies a status amongst families akin to Fred Rogers.

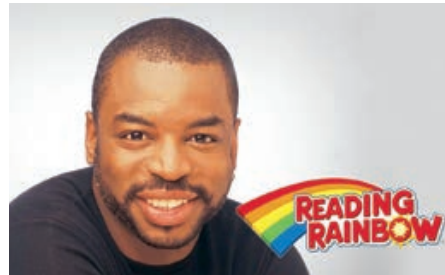
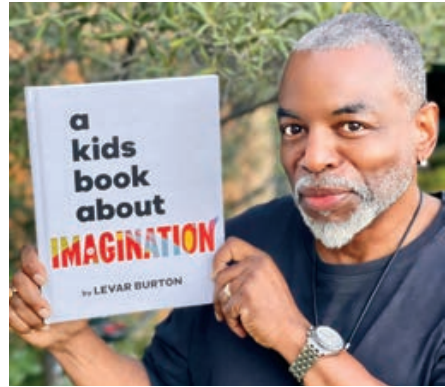
"Kids require a specific agreement, which is, 'I am not going to talk down to you. I'm going to treat you like a human being and we're going to get along fine,'" Burton said.

Burton was cast as Geordi La Forge in "Star Trek: The Next Generation," portraying a blind lieutenant

who wore a prosthetic visor to help him see. The role, which he played from the start of the series in 1987, and in subsequent "Star Trek" films, also gave him an opportunity to direct.

He later directed episodes of the TV show "Charmed," the Disney Channel Original Movie "Smart House" and "The Tiger Woods Story," among others.

He went on to host and executive produce the 2007 documentary *The Science of Peace*, appeared in a wide range of TV series, and even hosted the



Burton is also an author, his second children's book, *A Kids Book About Imagination*, was published in 2021. His 23 years hosting PBS's children's show, "Reading Rainbow," helped guide kids through the world of books. His work led to several daytime Emmys and a Peabody Award. Burton was the Grand Marshal for the 2022 Rose Parade, on New Year's Day in Pasadena, upper right. He is shown with wife, Stephanie Cozart Burton and actress daughter, Michaela "Mica" Jean.

Scripps National Spelling Bee. In 2017 he started a podcast reading short fiction, called "LeVar Burton Reads." His new children's podcast, "Sound Detectives," about sounds that go missing, debuted this year on SiriusXM. Another new project is the documentary *The Right to Read*, for which he was the executive producer.

Burton has also picked up the pen. He published a science-fiction novel in 1997 about a futuristic U.S. embroiled in a civil war, and co-authored a children's book, *The Rhino Who Swallowed a Storm*. His second children's book, *A Kids Book About Imagination*, was published in 2021

Burton said he relishes the diversity of his career. "I have all of these spokes on my wheel. No two days look the same for me," he said.

Burton has let his sense of humor guide some of his work: He played a ghost of himself in a 2010 episode of "Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!" and a funny version of himself in "The Big Bang Theory."

That ability to laugh at himself shone in a 2022 "Ask Me Anything" session on Reddit. When asked if people request that he sing the "Reading Rainbow" theme song, he replied, "I sing it all the time. It's my ringtone."

He was among the guest hosts of "Jeopardy!" in 2021, following the death of Alex Trebek, and made a public, but unsuccessful, run at the job. Not getting the position was difficult, but Burton said he decided to sit in the discomfort of not knowing at the time why he hadn't been selected.

There have been many more successes, including on the personal front. Burton has two adult

children. In 1992, he married Stephanie Cozart Burton, and they have a daughter, Michaela "Mica" Jean.

This year, Burton served as honorary chair of the public advocacy effort Banned Books Week, criticizing what he called "misguided efforts toward censorship" nationwide. The American Library Federation found documented challenges to 1,915 unique titles between January and August 30, a 20 percent increase from the same period a year earlier. Last year the organization saw the highest number of book challenges since it began compiling data two decades ago.

Burton's advice on changing that trend: "Vote. Vote. Vote. Vote."

What's the legacy he wants to be remembered for?

"He wanted kids to love reading. He wanted the world to read," Burton responds. "I am descended from slaves, from enslaved people for whom it was illegal to know how to read, a crime punishable by whipping or even death. So for a Black man to become a symbol of literacy in this country, especially for children?"

He added, "Have you ever heard the phrase, 'I am my ancestors' wildest dream'?"

CONGRATULATIONS!

Congratulations Roger Corman on receiving the LA Press Club's Distinguished Storyteller Award!

Your passion for storytelling has inspired generations of filmmakers, including me.

With respect and admiration,

– Gale Anne Hurd



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