In 1772, Phillis Wheatley, a young African slave that was owned and uniquely raised by the Wheatley family of Boston, was given a test by a group of notable men of the Massachusetts Bay Colony to prove that the poetry collection that she had written was in fact her own creation. Wheatley stood before these prominent men to answer their questions in order to prove her creativity and intellect. Catherine Clinton creates an imaginative story encompassing the day in which Phillis Wheatley walked to this examination. It is through this long walk to take the test that Clinton explains eighteen-year-old Phillis Wheatley’s past and the reasons that brought her to this day. Sights conjure Phillis Wheatley’s thoughts about her transatlantic journey to Boston Harbor from Africa. Her walk also brings forth the memories of how she was taught right along with the Wheatley children and how she was displayed to recite what she had learned to visitors at the Wheatley’s house.

Sean Qualls’ illustrations reflect a patriotic spirit through the muted acrylic paintings that mainly consist of red, white, blue, and brown tones. His historical imagery reflects how the sights during her walk trigger Phillis Wheatley’s thoughts about her past and her present fears.
It is not known what questions were asked of Phillis Wheatley on that day, but it is known that she did pass the exam. Proof of her vindication is the publication of her book *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) along with the open letter by John Wheatley and the prominent gentlemen of Massachusetts Bay Colony that are listed by name to notify readers that the poems within the book were written by “a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best judges, and is thought qualified to write them” (Preface). Many children will not know who Phillis Wheatley is, and it is unfortunate that Clinton did not include at least one of Wheatley’s poems to demonstrate what the test was about.

Catherine Clinton and Sean Qualls’s *Phillis’s Big Test* is a dedication to the first published black poet in the United States. This children’s picture book reflects through its existence the passing grade that was given to Phillis Wheatley, which was the entrance through a literary gate that has now been open to black poets for over two hundred years. Wheatley was not the only black poet to prove her artistry, but she was definitely the first to pass such a accusatory test, and this recognition alone is worth children reading this book.

Work Cited


About the Author

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