Staci Williams

Catherine Clinton’s prose tells an eloquent, yet insightful tale of history. Using the picture book format to weave the story of Phillis Wheatley, the first African American poet, Clinton is able to attract young readers to the often dreaded genres of historical fiction and nonfiction.

*Phillis’s Big Test* uses colorful pictures to highlight the luminous imagery already present in the story. Children in grades three through five will be drawn to the biography of Phillis Wheatley, as Wheatley speaks to them from the pages of the story. Clinton does a wonderful job portraying Wheatley’s thoughts and feelings on the day she was cross-examined by eighteen of the most powerful literary and political leaders of the sixteenth century in order to prove a slave girl could author a book of poetry. The author allows the reader to jump inside the character’s head, granting him or her full access to Phyllis’s worries and fears on the day of this historical event.

The reader journeys with Phillis as she walks with pages in hand to recite her poems for the most influential men of the Massachutes Bay Colony in 1772. Readers learn about Phillis’s life as a slave girl, the journey from her native land to America, and how she receives an education. As Phillis walks the cobblestone streets, many fears and apprehensions intersect in her mind. Although the setting takes place many years in the past, Phillis’s apprehensions are not so far removed from the emotions of young readers today. She feels nervous and doubtful while walking to her big test. Students should be able to relate to these doubts and fears and recognize Phillis’s ability to persevere through her apprehension. The words of her master, Susanna Wheatley, ring in her head, “Your talent will speak for itself” (unpaged). At this point in the story, Phillis realizes she must persevere and face the examiners “not just for herself or for the Wheatleys but for her family back in Africa, and for her new brothers and sisters in America, who deserved their own poet” (unpaged).

As a middle school language arts teacher, I found this book to be better suited for an elementary audience. I chose to read it to my son’s third grade class who had just finished a brief study of American history from the American Revolution through slavery and the Civil War. I believe this picture book provided a lyrical format for learning about a real African American leader from the history books. Students commented that learning about history through picture books was more interesting and realistic for them. The excellent illustrations also provided a visual format for comparing and contrasting students’
lives today to the life of a child in the sixteenth century. The book provided framework for a great class discussion on how Wheatley overcame the racism and rules of her time period to realize her dream of becoming a published poet. From the story, students learned that they have to believe in themselves and to have confidence in themselves. Some students focused on the poor treatment of others based solely on superficial reasons, such as skin color and race; just because one was a slave doesn’t mean they couldn’t write.

For these reasons, Phyllis’s Big Test would serve as a useful tool to librarians and educators alike. Educators could use the book to supplement study of many areas in social studies and language arts. It could be used collaboratively with lessons on colonial America, slavery, African American leaders, feminist studies, female leaders, as well as character education.

About the Author

Staci Williams is a sixth grade English teacher in Lafayette, Indiana. She received a bachelor’s degree in public relations from Purdue University and later a teaching license in language arts. She is currently working on a masters’ degree in English education. She has three sons: two in elementary school and one in middle school.