Second Reaction: Humble Beginnings-Monumental Achievements


**Jesolyn F. Larry**

Tonya Bolden does an excellent job of chronicling Carver’s birth in Missouri, the early separation from his mother, the subsequent life with his white “former” slave owners, and the insatiable desire to receive an education. Throughout the book, Carver’s love of and respect for nature, disdain for wastefulness, creative resourcefulness, and love of God (The Great Creator) are evident. I enjoyed this biography and thought it particularly relevant when we consider both today’s political climate and global environmental concerns. It is evident that everyone must do his or her part.

Even as a child, Carver’s resourcefulness was evident: “When he wanted to knit, he made needles from turkey feathers” (7). Since he didn’t have canvas, paintbrushes, or paint, he used twigs for brushes and boiled bark with juiced berries for colors. As a child, he always knew what a plant needed, thus he was nicknamed “The Plant Doctor.”

The importance of education to Carver’s inquisitive mind is evident when at age twelve he leaves home to find a school for blacks. Early on, he is told to “learn all you can and then go out into the world and give your learning back to our people” (10). The importance of having encouraging acquaintances who “believe in you” is found throughout Carver’s story, from Aunt Mariah in Neosho, John and Helen Milholland in Winterset, Iowa, and Joseph Budd in Ames, Iowa. Carver constantly befriends those who are impressed with his abilities and encourage him to do more—something with which I can relate.

After receiving his master’s degree, Carver went to Tuskegee to work with Booker T. Washington. For the first time, he would be among other black people. With little laboratory equipment, his innovativeness was again evident; he used “bottles and jars as beakers and Bunsen burners, small bowls and teacups as containers” (22) as he spread his message of “regard nature, revere nature, respect nature” (23). It was at Tuskegee that Carver taught students to treasure nature, to plant other crops such as yams and black-eyed peas, and to assist with restoring nutrients to the soil. He instituted a yearly Farmers’ Conference, a monthly Farmers’ Institute, a movable school—“The Jesup Agricultural Wagon”—for farmers unable to attend on-campus events, and developed numerous by-products from both sweet potatoes and peanuts. Unfortunately, I must admit that I, too, am one of those who have mistakenly credited the Wizard of Tuskegee with inventing peanut butter.

As Bolden examines Carver’s life, readers are treated to an extraordinarily entertaining book with historical photos and prints, including some of Carver’s actual sketches. The text is engaging and thoroughly enjoyable. The message regarding the environment and nature...
is certainly relevant today. However, it was interesting that little mention is given to Carver’s lack of political involvement or to the fact that for all his inventions, “he received little compensation, often refusing to apply for patents saying that his discoveries were freely provided by God” (Macleod 26). Overall, this is a well-organized read. Bolden sensitively shares Carver’s love of nature, his creativity and resourcefulness, as well as his talent for inspiring students. The mixture of historical photos with direct quotes from Carver is nothing short of delightful. This is an engaging reference that will appeal to readers of all ages.

Sharing the book with teachers and students

I shared this book with three teachers and there was great consensus on most questions. One teacher shared the book with three fifth graders; she thought that this book fit very well into promoting visual literacy due to the descriptive pictures and the captivating content. Another teacher felt that while the format might suggest a picture book, the text required older readers. One teacher suggested using it as a “coffee-table book.”

No one suggested not using the book; several suggestions were given for promoting the contributions of African Americans to society, exemplifying how African Americans have succeeded in spite of adversity by being creative with limited resources and remembering that one should not be wasteful.

Several methods were used to engage students. One teacher read the book over several days to her students; another assigned it to a few middle school students. Both teachers asked questions of the students to ensure their understanding. They also introduced vocabulary words, required students to make inferences regarding the sequencing of events, and expected detailed explanations for answers. Yet another teacher felt that this book would lend itself to the metacognition problem solving approach, engaging students to think about science. The book also lends itself to the constructivist approach.
whereby students would be researching and engaging in active problem solving regarding scientific issues.

All of the teachers were impressed with the book and several of its common themes, such as the determination to succeed in spite of a humble beginning by overcoming great obstacles and ultimately becoming an asset to society. Another favorable theme is the importance of protecting nature, being more ecologically savvy on a global scale, and realizing that everyone can contribute to protecting our planet.

The young readers were fascinated with Carver’s life; they didn’t know and could not understand that at one time, there were schools that did not admit African American students. This realization seemed to have a profound effect on them.

About the Author

Jesolyn F. Larry, Ph.D. is Executive Director of The St. Louis Public Schools’ Information Technology Division in St. Louis, Missouri. Additionally, she is Chair of the Board of Education of The Friendly Temple MB Church Child Development Center, which is scheduled to open in fall of 2009. She and her husband, Mark, live in Valley Park, Missouri. Her daughter, Kandace, who grew up in West Lafayette, Indiana, now lives in Washington, D.C.