Second Reaction: Your Future is Limitless!


I had the privilege of reading and sharing this picture book biography of the first woman doctor in America, entitled *Who Says Women Can’t Be Doctors?*, written by Tanya Lee Stone and illustrated by Marjorie Priceman, with my nearly six-year-old son, Ashton. This inspiring book tells the story of Elizabeth Blackwell and her quest to become the first woman doctor of her time. Elizabeth was a strong-willed, determined girl from the time she was young, who “wanted to explore around every corner and never walked away from a challenge” (Stone unpaged). She never thought she wanted to be a doctor, because blood made her queasy and the bull’s eyeball her teacher once used to show how eyeballs work repulsed her. However, once the thought of becoming the first female doctor was embedded in her mind by her dear friend Mary Donaldson at the age of twenty-four, Elizabeth worked hard to overcome numerous obstacles to achieve her dream and pave the way for the future of female doctors throughout the world. This story has a great message for children and adults of all ages: Work hard to achieve your dreams and overcome obstacles, believe in yourself, and your future is limitless.
Prior to reading the text and judging by the title alone, I was unsure how well my son would connect to the text and wondered how motivated he would be to actively engage in the reading with me. To my delight, I found innumerable opportunities to activate his prior knowledge, make connections and predictions related to the text, and scaffold his critical thinking skills as we read. The vivid and lively illustrations on the cover and throughout the book provided me with an excellent opportunity to model and encourage using the pictures to gather additional information about the text before, during, and after reading.

I introduced the story to Ashton by asking him whether or not women are allowed to be doctors today and talking about his current doctor, who happens to be a woman. I provided him with background knowledge related to the history of women and their role in society in the past. We read the first several pages, pointing out pictures of roles women used to be confined to, and stopping after we read about Elizabeth’s character as a child in order to make inferences about her in the form of a brief character map, referring back to the text for evidence. Together, we decided that Elizabeth must be strong and tough in order to hold her brother above her head and since she slept “on the hard floor with no covers” (Stone unpaged). Ashton determined that she was “not scared” after looking at the picture of her stretching out with a spyglass in a scenario that he described as looking “dangerous.” From this picture, we also determined that she was curious and Ashton reminded me that she “never walked away from a challenge.” Ashton was able to make a personal connection to this when I asked him if he challenged himself at school and how. Ashton stated that he challenged himself by “listening a lot, paying attention, and trying things that are hard.”

As I continued to read the text fluently with expression to further engage him in the story, we stopped to discuss the meaning of some tricky, unfamiliar vocabulary words. I modeled the meaning of the words *queasy* and *repulsed* by acting them out and Ashton laughed. We also discussed the meaning of the sentence, “She hated anyone fussing over her.” Ashton determined that this phrase meant that she didn’t want anyone messing with her.

At this point in the text, I had to redirect and scaffold some of Ashton’s thinking as he was eager to predict what would happen next and began to look ahead at the pictures prior to reading further. Ashton was determined that there was some form of villain in the story as he predicted that “maybe there’s someone scary in this book” and later he justified his response by stating that he thought there was a “bad guy” in the text “because of those feet,” referring to the dark pair of shoes when Elizabeth was accepted to medical school at Geneva Medical School. I redirected his thinking by reminding him about the overall message of the book being about Elizabeth’s plight to become the first female doctor. Later, Ashton had experience checking and revising another prediction he had made as he gathered more information from the text when he realized that the letters sent to Elizabeth rejecting her from twenty-eight universities prior to her acceptance letter were the reasons for the numerous “No’s” on that page. We discussed how hard Elizabeth had to study to “keep up” with her peers and prove the
former idea that women weren’t “smart enough” to be complete nonsense. I used this idea to encourage Ashton to study hard too!

Reading Who Says Women Can’t Be Doctors?, a biography about an everyday girl who defied the odds by challenging herself and refusing to give up, was a great learning experience for my son and me. I think this book has a message that would be beneficial for children and adults of all ages as it provides an opportunity to reflect on the past and the significance one individual can make in the lives of many.

About the Author

Brooke M. Vermilya is a former elementary classroom teacher who currently teaches pre-service teachers in a literacy course at Purdue University. She is married and has two young sons. She loves collecting and reading books of all genres with her family and students.