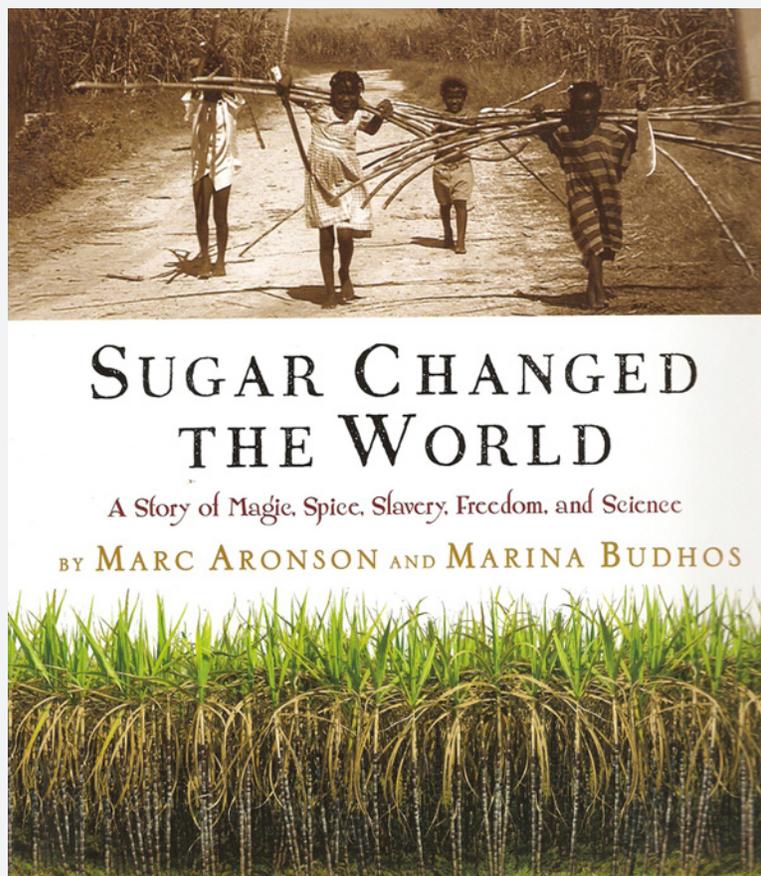


Second Reaction: Ramos de Azucár: A Sesquigenerational Glance At Sugar's Impact On Our Family

Higgins, Dalton. *Hip Hop World: A Groundwork Guide*. Toronto: Groundwood Books, 2009.

Edwin A. Ramos



How did I feel about the theme and text while working with it? "Extremes"

As I read *Sugar Changed the World*, I felt the dichotomy of the pain and nourishment that sugar has provided to so many people. For the slaves, indentured servants, and farmers toiling in the cane fields over the course of time, the sugar cane has been a source of day-in and day-out misery, yet necessary nourishment for them. Consequently, the sugar plantations and their successor corporations, along with the sweet-toothed consumers of the world, are the ones who have also reaped at least a dichotomy of consequences: a

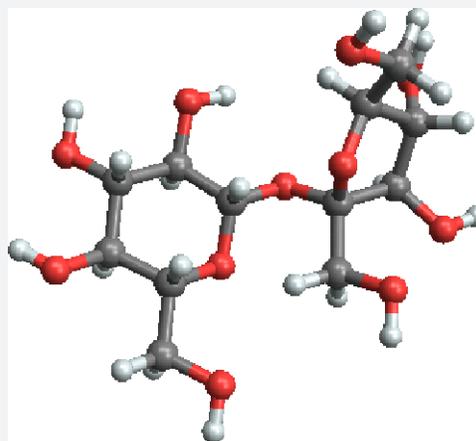
heightened risk of diabetes and range of dulcitudinous options. In the spirit of comparison and contrast, the husband-and-wife team of Marc Aronson and Marina Budhos offered their own sugar stories in the “Prologue” before they tag-teamed a riveting if not heart-warming account of the trials, tribulations, and turmoil behind the growth, spread, and marketing of sugar over millennia. Their personal connection and investment in the book not only raised the interest-level for me in starting the book, but it also established a candid credibility that underscored the horrors and marvels brought alive in their pages.

Their 166-page distillation of sugar made me hungry to tap into my own family to learn how we have been connected to sweet comestibles and potables. This book immediately reminded me of a hardened piece of sugar cane that my father used to carry in his car as he commuted into urban Chicago for work. Papi’s cane-mace at one time must have been sweet, but ironically it was hardened over the course of time into an instrument of defense, much like cane sticks of the Brazilian Maculelê on page 55. Considering my paternal Puerto Rican heritage, it came as no surprise that my abuelito had tried his hand and eventually capitulated working in a cane field on the Island. In addition to the scourge of diabetes that sugar has presented to many of my paternal relatives, it has indeed been a source of wonderful ethnic dishes on both sides of my family. The budín or “bread pudding,” just like the farina made by my Puerto Rican girlfriend, would not have its savor without sugar.

My maternal grandmother’s Polish side of the family relied on the sugar of beets for many Polish dishes, which is ironic considering the prominent role that Marc Aronson’s progenitor played in the development of sugar from beets.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that given my maternal grandfather’s highly traditional mindset, he listed in his obituary that he was a beekeeper, almost espousing himself to the “Age of Honey” rather than the “Age of Sugar.”

My mother’s insight as a registered and licensed dietitian helped me gain a better insight into the chemical, nutritional, and scientific aspects of sugar. Saccharides, which are derived from sugar cane, can be simple (monosaccharides), compound (disaccharides), or complex (polysaccharides). Glucose ($C_6H_{12}O_6$), a direct byproduct of photosynthesis. When it is combined with fructose ($C_6H_{12}O_6$), the two form the disaccharide sucrose ($C_{12}O_{22}H_{11}$). Mom used the textbook for the college class she instructs to explain the principle to me, although I have supplied an online image to demonstrate the chemical reaction behind sucrose.



Specifically, how did I engage readers with this book?

My sister Lizzy and girlfriend Evie took turns reading the book to each other and talking about it, and I asked them probing questions.

I also turned over a copy of the book to the English teacher at the school where I was student-teaching mathematics. I had hoped that with her guidance, I would be able to initiate some team-wide analysis of the book during the school's bonus/incentive period as I wrapped up my last weeks of student-teaching.

From a scientific standpoint, the book begins with a useful illustration of "Saccharum Officinarum"—the Linnaean genus and species name for sugar cane. While the maps, diagrams, and pictures help the story of sugar come to life, the authors have been sensible enough to allow the pictures and text to be printed in black and white, along with a bibliography that provides specific directions where the reader can find color versions of much of what is included in the text.

From my sister Lizzy's perspective, the most striking picture is #21, which is featured on the cover and on page 52.

"Edwin," Lizzy points out to me, "Those kids are my age or younger, and guess what year the picture was taken?"

"When, sis?" I ask. I am excited to see where my sister is going with her train of thought.

"It was taken in 2005, not very long ago."

As our conversation continues, I realize that Lizzy is making several connections. If not for several key differences, circumstances in her life may have had her working hard in a cane field just to survive. Moreover, Lizzy is shrewd enough to point out that the picture could have been taken in an earlier year like 1920 just as easily as 2005.

What feedback did I receive from young readers? "An opportunity to learn"

Lizzy mentioned to me, "The stories in the book are sad, but we need to read it. We don't need to make the same mistakes."

Her historical comments extended into slavery in particular: "What happened to all the people who were forced to work for sugar? When were they free?"

Lizzy also shared her opinion with me about the usability of the book in a K-8 curriculum: "Edwin, if this book's going to work, it needs to be spread out over a longer period of time, like a quarter; the teacher can't assign it for a couple of weeks like you did."

What further activities or observations about this text occur to me now?

The unspoken and hidden curriculum behind sugar's grip on current American society is the enslavement that so many Americans are currently suffering from diabetes, obesity, and other ailments are due to its abuse. More time can be spent analyzing not only the

science behind sugar's role in these disorders, but also a parallel can be conducted between these debilitating diseases and the debilitating lifestyle of a sugar cane cultivator.

The process of gathering sugar stories provides an interesting oral history opportunity for classrooms using this book. Students can interview elderly relatives, their parents, or other respected community figures to gain some insight about the role that sugar has played in their lives.

Other polysaccharides, like maltose and lactose, would yield a wider scope of study for students and instructors willing to consider the history of other food, drink, and world-changing phenomena spanning the agricultural revolution to the present-day.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Edwin A. Ramos is a current Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellow of Indiana out of the STEM Goes Rural program at Purdue University. He has earned a Bachelor's of Art in classics from Northwestern and a Bachelor's of Science in mathematics from the University of Southern Indiana.