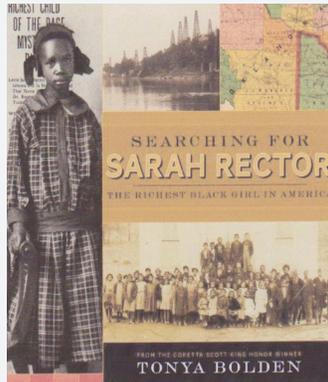


Second Reaction: Sarah Rector: Her Story

Bolden, Tonya. *Searching for Sarah Rector: The Richest Black Girl in America*.
 New York: Abrams, 2014.

Elaine Dunbar



Author Tonya Bolden tells the story of twelve-year-old Sarah Rector, who became wealthy beyond imagination when oil was discovered on her Oklahoma land in 1913. In the “Prologue,” Bolden prepares the reader for the mystery that will unfold with the turning of the pages, a mystery that begins with news of Sarah Rector’s possible abduction in the *Chicago Defender* in March 1914. The story is center stage with history providing the backdrop. Although I am not very familiar with the genre, I suspect that the book falls within the category of creative nonfiction, which I’ve seen described as “true stories well told.” This story is developed a scene at a time, beginning with the kidnapping alert and continuing through to controversies about Rector’s education and the oversight of her wealth. Concerns about Rector’s whereabouts and whether she was receiving adequate education were expressed by R.S. Abbott, editor of the *Chicago Defender*, and echoed by W.E.B. Du Bois, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), headquartered in New York City. The scene changes from the investigation of kidnapping and general welfare to the investigation of the management of Rector’s finances. Bolden describes the exchange between Du Bois and the Muskogee County’s Judge Leahy with a liveliness that makes the conversation seem like it happened yesterday, not a hundred years ago. Bolden finds her answers about management of the money in two primary sources: 1) news reports of the integrity of Leahy, who oversaw Rector’s guardians, and 2) the transcript of a court hearing detailing Rector’s guardians asking to sell land on her behalf. These three men—Abbott, Du Bois, and Leahy—who championed Rector’s well-being may have contributed to her avoiding the fate of others.

Rector lived a relatively good life. She was not kidnapped, was not placed in an orphanage while others spent her riches, and escaped the fate of two children she may have known who were murdered for their oil-rich land. The moral to the story of Rector might be construed as: 1) concern for Rector's well-being from the National Black Press may have kept her safe, and 2) the county judge who oversaw the guardians' work safeguarded Rector's riches.

I asked seventh grader Marguerite LaPlant, who has a passion for history, to read *Searching for Sarah Rector* and to discuss the book. She explained that history is her favorite subject because it combines the strengths of math with what she likes about English: "Math is set in stone; you perform the correct procedure and you get the answer. English is not set in stone; it is too lenient. It is all opinion."

Using these concepts—"fact" and "opinion"—I briefly consider Bolden's *Searching for Sarah Rector*. Bolden invites the reader to solve a mystery by investigating the facts of the story from many different angles. Bolden's invitation to the reader to help solve a mystery flows throughout the book:

So where was Sarah Rector when the *Defender* was in frenzy, fearing her kid-napped?

Hidden away by T.J. Porter [her guardian]?

Nope.

Wooed away by a gold-digging German or other money-grubbing man?

Not at all.

Murdered?

Thank goodness no. (31)

Bolden models the making of history by asking questions and answering them, often using primary sources, and thus stimulating the reader to do his or her own sleuthing. In her "First Opinion" for *Searching for Sarah Rector*, Paula T. Connolly comments:

With several stories sharing space on a page, Bolden's text is visually multifaceted as well. Sidebars frequently provide complementary historical background and the book is richly illustrated, including reproductions of photographs, paintings, newspaper articles, and maps. (39)

An inset on page 9 notes that slaves were freed by Creek chief Opothle Yoholo so they could join their former Indian masters in defending against Confederate attack; page 29 provides the newspaper article titled "Richest Child of the Race Mysteriously Disappears," referenced in the Prologue.

Marguerite is preparing a history of the Dakota people in anticipation of entering the National History Day Competition this spring. *Searching for Sarah Rector* provides an excellent

springboard for Marguerite and others in grades 6 to 12 as they begin their journey to mine the “facts” that will inform their “opinions” in preparation for the competition. (The theme of next year’s National History Day is “Rights and Responsibilities in History.”)

From my perspective, *Searching for Sarah Rector* would have been an even better “her story” had Bolden been more able to bridge the distance between what Marguerite calls “the facts” and what in her shorthand she calls “opinions.” Returning to the description of doing history that melds the surety of the answer to a math problem—the “facts” of Rector’s life—and creativity and imagination—as a source of new insights into the interpretation and analysis of history, Bolden’s strength lies in the former. The richness of the details of Sarah Rector’s life both add to, and call for, a more carefully considered story of the, to be brief, white property interests that underlie the political, economic, and social structure of the period. As Connolly pointed out in her review for *FOSR*, we owe no less to “the young children” living in “dangerous times” (39) than to continue to visit the past and write the story that will guide us in creating a more secure present.

Works Cited

Connolly, Paula T. “First Opinion: Searching for Sarah and Finding History.” *First Opinions, Second Reactions* 6.3 (2013): Article 13. Web. Retrieved from <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/fosr/vol6/iss3/13>.

About the Author

Elaine Dunbar is a literacy tutor in the Saint Paul Public Schools, coauthor with Kathleen Barlow of “Race, Class, and Whiteness in Gifted and Talented Identification: A Case Study” (*Berkeley Review of Education* 1.1 [2010]).