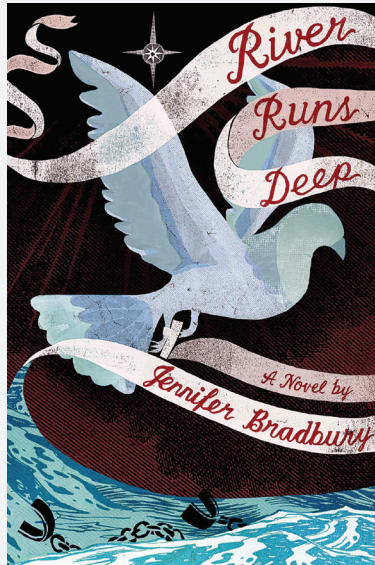


First Opinion: The Greatest Secret Never Told

Bradbury, Jennifer. *River Runs Deep*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2016.

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River Runs Deep is a fictional novel loosely based on the historical happenings in Mammoth Cave during the mid-1800s. Using experimental methods to treat tuberculosis, Dr. John Groghan's patients were hospitalized and resided inside the cave, also under the care of African American slaves. The story is told primarily through the eyes of Elias, a young boy from Virginia whose father died from the same illness. Having exhausted all other measures to get him well, Elias's mother decided it would be best to send him to Dr. Groghan, who proclaimed that the cave's healing vapors and special treatment therapy could reverse the fatal disease. Initially resentful of his family for sending him so far from home, Elias eventually makes friends with other patients and then becomes deeply interested in a strange voice that whispers through the night.

As his health steadily increases, Elias's inquisitive nature leads him to explore the cave. He becomes fond of some of the workers—so much so that they request his help on other adventures, both those sanctioned by Dr. Groghan and those that are secret. However, Mr. Pennyrile, another patient, knows of Elias's secret excursions and forces him to fetch and return mysterious letters from places outside of the cave. The story takes an interesting turn when Elias discovers that the cave is also refuge to a colony of runaway slaves, and the strange voice he once heard becomes a good friend. Elias is also led to believe that special water from a hidden spring inside the cave has magical healing powers, but only the slaves know how to access it. While Dr. Groghan and other patients have begun to remark on his improved health,

Mr. Pennyrile suspects that Elias is only getting better because the slaves have given him the mystery tonic. Mr. Pennyrile serves as the main antagonist by being sneaky, conniving, and ruthless in his tactics to get Elias to reveal the secrets of the cave. The novel ends with Elias returning to his family with two incredible stories. One is of his healing and the peculiar antics used to get him well; and the other—how he helped to save the lives of dozens of slaves—he can never share.

In this young adult read, Jennifer Bradbury provides a vivid description of the setting in such a way that allows the reader to accurately journey through the cave with Elias, Stephen Bishop, and the other characters. She is also very clear and intentional with language use that matches the time period and geographical region. Additionally, Bradbury does an extraordinary job of foreshadowing to keep readers engaged in critical points of the story. As in any good mystery novel, she leaves clues throughout the chapters, which allows the reader to consciously and effectively piece together elements in the novel. On the other hand, there are some things to consider when situating the text. In terms of character development, there are somewhat dimming perspectives about the African American slaves and their own ideals about education, freedom, and cultural heritage. In particular, there is an excerpt where Jonah, one of the slaves, rebels against learning because he defines it as “boring.” In another instance, one of the African American slaves makes reference that they have no interest in going to Africa, because they don’t consider it their home.

In terms of cultural relevancy, these troubling assertions throughout the text about the slaves may have deeper implications for African American readers. The implicitness of slaves being submissive—even those who were runaways—is also a potentially dangerous concept, as it plants the notion that these were a people who were subordinate and unable to rebel against social injustices. For that reason, I would not consider the text to be culturally affirming for African American readers, but perhaps an extension activity that examines the real-life persons that the characters are supposed to emulate would help students make connections not only to the text, but also to their own cultural identities. However, it is worth noting that Bradbury does an effective job in developing the characterization of Elias, who initially has mixed perspectives about slavery but, toward the end of his stint in the cave, develops a greater understanding of human civility.

Despite the aforementioned, this book would be particularly powerful if read in a reader’s theater format where students were to embrace the dialogue presented in the text. Perhaps one of the strongest points of this historically fictional text is that additional readings and resources are provided for real-world connections—quite possibly to the extent of creating an educational field experience to Mammoth Cave to research the main characters and events throughout the story.

About the Author

Lakia M. Scott is an assistant professor of curriculum and instruction at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, where she teaches elementary literacy methods courses to preservice teachers. Her current research interests include creating and sustaining literacy programming for minoritized youth and increasing multicultural awareness and perspectives in diversity in teacher education programs. As an avid reader of children’s books, she loves to take adventures and prides herself in “getting lost” in the stories of others. As a wife and mother of one tenacious two-year-old explorer, Scott’s family also enjoys traveling to local and international destinations, some of which are based on children’s literature and notable authors.