

**UP THE LEARNING TREE  
BY MARCIA VAUGHAN**

**Louisiana Young Readers' Choice Award Nominee 2006  
Grades 3-5**

Submitted by Mary Jo Kelly, School Librarian  
Park Forest Elementary School, Baton Rouge

**Title: Up the Learning Tree**  
**Author: Marcia Vaughan**  
**Illustrator: Derek Blanks**  
**Publisher: Lee & Low Books, 2003**  
**Pages: 32**

**Summary**

Young Henry Bell, one of the Grismores' slaves, has to accompany young Master Simon to and from school every day. Even though he knows that slaves are not supposed to read, he is hungry to learn how to do it. Each day, Henry tries to complete his chores so that he can go back to the schoolhouse early, climb the old sycamore tree, and watch the lessons through the window. Because he has nothing else to write on, Henry carves letters and words into the bark of the tree. When Simon stays home to avoid the fever, Henry must go to the school each day to get lessons for the young master. On his way home, he pours over each lesson to continue to learn. Miss Hattie, the teacher, catches Henry trying to take home a discarded book. She risks everything to help him learn. Even though she is discovered and driven away by the plantation owners, Henry is determined to continue to learn because he knows that education will help him escape to freedom.

**Quality of the Text and Illustrations**

The story, told in first person by the protagonist, Henry evokes pathos. The text is replete with messages that were crafted to allay fears without reducing the story to saccharine. ("Hugging that book's like hugging hope.") The lush paintings and their dream-like quality evoke "a once-upon-a-time" feeling that softens the harshness of the "life-and-death struggle" by the boy and the teacher. The color in the oil paintings emphasizes the shifting mood of the story: the lush green grass in scenes of Henry reading contrasts with the somber browns and reds of the scenes in which Henry is caught and the teacher is driven away. The final scene of Henry reading in the tree includes cool green leaves that are evocative of the growth of Henry's education.

## **Awards and Best Book Lists**

Best Children's Book of the Year. Bank Street College  
2004 Best Picture Book Honor. Society of School Librarians International  
Honorable Mention. Myers Outstanding Book Award. Gustavus Myers Center for  
the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights in North America  
Storytelling World Award 2005. Storytelling World magazine

## **Author's Biography**

Marcia Vaughan, former school librarian, did not begin writing until she was thirty. She is the author of several children's picture books. She was moved to write *Up the Learning Tree* after reading about people who risked death to learn to read in Civil War-era slave narratives. Vaughan lives with her husband and their son in Vashon Island, Washington. (Source: Lee and Low Books)

## **Illustrator's Biography**

Derek Blanks received a B.F.A. in 2000 from the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, where he graduated Magna cum laude. He has worked as a painter and freelance illustrator for museums, art magazines and galleries. He also worked for *The Baltimore Sun*. *Up the Learning Tree* is his first picture book. He is currently working as a graphic artist and photographer. Born in Mississippi, he now lives in College Park, Georgia near Atlanta with his wife. (Source: Lee and Low Books)

## **Other Titles by Marcia Vaughan**

*Abbie Against the Storm: The True Story of a Young Heroine and a Lighthouse*  
*The Dancing Dragon*  
*The Secret to Freedom*  
*Snap!*

## **Related Titles**

*The Bee Tree* by Patricia Polacco  
*Boxes for Katje* by Candace Fleming  
*First Day in Grapes* (Pura Belpre Honor Book Illustrator (Awards)) by L. King  
Perez  
*Frederick Douglass and the Last Days of Slavery* by William Miller  
*Freedom School, Yes!* by Amy Littlesugar  
*Goin' Someplace Special* by Patricia McKissack  
*The Hard-Times Jar* by Ethel Footman Smothers  
*Little Firefly* by Terri Cohlene  
*Richard Wright and the Library Card* by William Miller  
*Sweet Potato Pie* by Kathleen D. Lindsey

*Tomás and the Library Lady/Tomás y la señora de la biblioteca* by Pat Mora  
*Where Are You Going? To See My Friend!* by Kazuo Iwamura  
*Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree* by William Miller

## Classroom Connections

- This book could be part of a study during Black History Month. There are literally hundreds of good sites with activities that could be used in conjunction with this book to address most language arts and social studies indicators for the grades 2-4. The Field Guide to Parenting web site gives parents and teachers ideas to develop skills in conjunction with historical explorations:  
<http://www.fieldguidetoparenting.info/Featured%20Black%20History%20Month.htm>
- The book is an excellent introduction to National Library Week or Children's Book Week. Use it with *Goin' Someplace Special* by Patricia McKissack and *Tomás and the Library Lady/Tomás y la señora de la biblioteca* by Pat Mora.

## Web Sites

American Slave Narratives

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/wpa/wpahome.html>

Short excerpts from slave narratives.

Carol Hurst's Literature Site: Slavery in the United States

<http://www.carolhurst.com/subjects/slavery.html>

Carol Hurst's site on teaching about slavery. This is an excellent resource with classroom activities, booklists and web links.

Children's Books on Slavery

<http://jhunix.hcf.jhu.edu/~plarson/smuseum/chbooks.htm>

Contains a list of related books about slavery.

Kids Click!

<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/searchkids.pl?keywords=slavery&searchtype=all>  
Contains additional sites related to slavery.

Lee & Low Books – Booktalk with Marcia Vaughan

<http://www.leeandlow.com/booktalk/mvaughan.html>

Publisher site contains an interview with the author.

Lee & Low Books – Teachers

<http://www.leeandlow.com/teachers/index.html>

The publisher's resource center allows teachers to search by title, theme, and subject of a book.