

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT



Deborah Hopkinson on *Carter Reads the Newspaper*

Carter G. Woodson was born to two formerly enslaved people ten years after the end of the Civil War. Though his father could not read, he believed in being an informed citizen. So Carter read the newspaper to him every day. When he was still a teenager, Carter went to work in the coal mines. There he met a man named Oliver Jones, and Oliver did something important: he asked Carter not only to read to him and the other miners, but also research and find more information on the subjects that interested them. “My interest in penetrating the past of my people was deepened,” Carter wrote. His journey would take him many more years, traveling around the world and transforming the way people thought about history.

Q: What interested you in Carter’s story and the role he played in American history?

A: In 2007, a book I wrote (*Up Before Daybreak: Cotton and People in America*) was named a Carter G. Woodson Honor Book by the National Council of the Social Studies. I had heard of Dr. Woodson before then, but I became interested in his life at that time, and began trying to learn more. My first drafts of this picture book date back to 2009, so it’s been a long time in the making.

Q: Carter Reads the Newspaper is the first-ever trade picture book biography of Carter G. Woodson. Why do you think there aren’t more children’s books about him?

A: There have been some books about Dr. Woodson, including a 1991 book, *Carter G. Woodson, The Father of Black History*, by the team of Patricia and Frederick McKissack, who created so many wonderful books. But perhaps there have been few books because he wrote little about his own life. And it’s not so easy to illustrate picture books about historians and educators. But Don Tate’s luminous artwork brings Carter G. Woodson to life. And I love how the themes of newspapers and reading are woven into the story.

Q: What was your research process like? Was it difficult to find reliable sources from so long ago?

A: I often start with an academic source and follow the breadcrumbs from there. I tell students research is much like being a detective.

I found Jacqueline Goggin’s *Carter G. Woodson: A Life in Black History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993) an excellent launching point. One challenge in writing about Dr. Woodson’s life is that he wrote little that was autobiographical. But he did share some insights into his life, including his time with Oliver Jones, in an essay entitled “My Recollections of Veterans of the Civil War,” published in 1944 in his journal, *The Negro History Bulletin*, a copy of which I was able to track down.

Q: Are there any interesting parts from Carter’s story you had to leave out?

A: There is one wonderful anecdote I came across; it was relayed by the late historian and scholar, Dr. John Hope Franklin. When he was first starting out, he attended the same conference as Dr. Woodson. One day, Dr. Franklin received a telegram about a family emergency. As a courtesy, Dr. Franklin went to tell Dr.

Woodson that he needed to leave early. Knowing that the young scholar had few resources, without a second thought Dr. Woodson reached into his pocket and said, and I am paraphrasing, “Do you have the fare?”

Q: In your Author’s Note, you quoted Carter: “The teaching of the whole truth will help us in the direction of a real democracy.” Why did you choose this quote and what does it mean to you?

A: I think it’s an amazing quote, and just as relevant today as it was in the 1940s. I first became interested in history in fourth grade. I liked to read about girls and women in the past, and I devoured whatever biographies I could find. But there weren’t many. I also have a clear memory of reading fascinating tidbits about people in the shaded boxes of my history textbook. However, most of the book seemed to be about generals and presidents—just names and dates to memorize.

Today, we have more books to share during Black History Month and Women’s History Month (and beyond), and, hopefully, an ever-expanding number of diverse voices. It’s really exciting to see these new, amazing stories, and of course, much more needs to be done. But I hope these books will help young readers develop a more inclusive history of our country and give them a deeper understanding of the struggles to attain social justice and equality in a democracy.

Q: Why do you believe it is important for young readers of all backgrounds to learn about Carter’s story?

A: Carter G. Woodson addressed this himself, I think. In an article in the *Negro History Bulletin* entitled “How to Make Negro History Week Count,” Carter wrote about the importance of school and public libraries and he foreshadowed today’s calls for more books by and about people of color: “Ask repeatedly for such books. Show that there is a demand for them.”

He added, “Why should any children be given the opportunity to learn only the half truth...?” He argued that half-truths only perpetuated bias.

Q: At one point in the story, you mention that Carter’s father believed in being an informed citizen which is why he encouraged Carter to read to him. Do you think it is important for young readers today to be informed citizens?

A: Yes, absolutely. When I wrote drafts of this book some years ago, I couldn’t imagine the extent to which journalists would be under attack as they are now. But the skills Dr. Woodson learned as a reader and a historian are those historical-thinking principles I try to emphasize when I visit schools: sourcing, contextualizing, corroboration, and close reading. These are the skills that citizens of the 21st century need in order to grapple with serious and complex issues, most especially climate change.

Q: How is Carter’s story relevant in today’s society?

A: Carter was surrounded by curious, determined, and hard-working role models. I think it’s clear that he lived by those values of hard work and perseverance, and that all of us benefit today because of it. I hope Carter’s story highlights the value of life-long learning by reading, studying, and taking the time to become informed about issues.

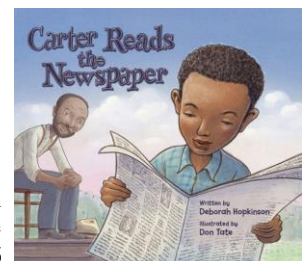
Q: What else do you hope young readers take away from this book?

A: I hope the story of Dr. Woodson’s life makes them curious about their own families, and encourages them to ask people they know about their own lives. I also hope readers come away with a sense that the past is peopled by extraordinary individuals we might not necessarily know about. I love how Don Tate’s endpapers featuring figures in Black history help to illustrate that.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deborah Hopkinson is the award-winning author of numerous critically acclaimed picture and chapter books, including *Keep On!*; *Sweet Land of Liberty*; *Under the Quilt of Night*; and *Shutting Out the Sky: Life in the Tenements of New York 1880–1924*. She lives in Oregon.

www.deborahhopkinson.com



Written by Deborah Hopkinson
Illustrated by Don Tate
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