



PEACHTREE

---

# ILLUSTRATOR SPOTLIGHT

---



## Don Tate

### 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 made you want to take on this project?***

**A:** I love stories that offer an opportunity to highlight the lives of little-known African-American heroes. I was familiar with the name of Carter G. Woodson, but I didn’t know why. When I realized that he was known as the “Father of Black History,” the man who inspired the Black History Month observation, I knew I had to illustrate the story. I was surprised Woodson’s story hadn’t already been told.

**Q: *What is your illustration process like?***

**A:** My illustration process begins with thumbnail sketches—tiny sketches that allow me to plan out the book. I create them without much visual research at first. At that point, I just want to focus on dividing up the text from spread to spread. It’s important to pace the story, from full-page spreads to single vignettes.

As I’m sketching, I wonder what things really might have looked like. Author Deborah Hopkinson begins Woodson’s story in his childhood. His family lived on a Virginia farm, about ten years following the Civil War. My question: what did the farm look like? That’s where hours of research come in. I may not find that exact

farmhouse, but I look for other farms from that era in that area.

**Q: *How did you research for this book?***

**A:** Thankfully, the author shared research materials with me that she used to write the story. But then I did my own visual research. I found pictures on the Internet by searching sites like Google and Bing. I contacted librarians at the Chicago Public Library. I found more images on The Library of Congress website. I even looked up some articles published in Woodson’s *Journal of Negro History*. It’s important to inform my drawings as much as possible.

In an early scene, Hopkinson writes about young Carter attending school. With a picture book, the author doesn’t include details of what that scene might have looked like. That’s where my job as a visual researcher kicks in. What would a classroom way back then have looked like? How would the teacher have dressed? Wore her hair? These are clues to the time period. At first, I drew the teacher as a young woman because, well, most of my teachers have been women. Research revealed to me, however, that Carter’s uncles ran the school he attended, and they were his teachers. I had to redraw that scene.

**Q: How do you believe the illustrations further the importance of the story?**

**A:** The illustrations do the work that the words cannot. With a picture book, the author must tell the story with few words. The illustrations flesh out the story; they say what the words cannot.

In addition, this is a story about a Black historical figure. It highlights Black History Month. It also introduces many other Black historical figures. The author of the book, however, is White. Now, there's nothing wrong with that. Skin color shouldn't limit what people are allowed to write about. Deborah Hopkinson is a wonderful, award-winning writer, who I'm proud to have had an opportunity to collaborate with. But with all that Black history inside one book, I think it's important that a Black person have an opportunity to contribute to its making. Black history has often been told through all-White lenses, contributing to misrepresentations.

As the illustrator, I'm telling my people's history. So, it's particularly important for me to get the visuals right, best I can. I think it's also important for kids of color to know that they can grow up to be writers and illustrators of books, too, because—hey, one of the creators of this book looks like me!

**Q: Can you tell us a little more about the figure heads on the front and back endpapers?**

**A:** I'm always looking for opportunities to share even more information with my readers. *Carter Reads the Newspaper* speaks to the origins of Black History Month. Black history taught in schools begins with slavery. I wanted my readers to know that Black history stretches back to the beginning of time.

The challenge was finding pre-slavery figures to feature—and quickly, because I was working against an approaching deadline! African societies preserved histories through art, written and oral forms. There were rich kingdoms with powerful kings and queens. Societies with their own languages, cultures, politics, religions. But European countries colonized Africa, robbing its people of their natural resources, land, and heritage. A lot of their histories were lost forever. It doesn't mean those histories don't exist—they do! You just have to dig.

I opened the endpapers with figures like Taharqua, an Egyptian pharaoh, last ruler of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty. I also featured Queen Amina of Zaria, who was a fierce warrior queen, the first woman to become the *Sarauniya* (queen) in a male-dominated society. I closed the endpapers with two of my favorite living historical figures: Michelle and Barack Obama.

My hope is that readers will be inspired by these historical figures and do more research on their own.

**Q: Your “Illustrator’s Note” mentions that you did not have many opportunities to learn about Black history in school. What does it mean to you to know current and future generations of students are given more opportunities to learn about these important moments in Black history?**

**A:** It's good that current generations are exposed to more Black history than when I was a kid. But more work is needed. Often, the same handful of historical figures show up time and again in books. My son learned about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks in school. But what about other important figures? Another book I wrote is called *Poet: The Remarkable Story of George Moses Horton*. It's the true story of an enslaved man who taught himself to read and later wrote poetry protesting his enslavement. While Horton's story wasn't in my son's classroom history books, he can now be discovered in school libraries. Thank you, librarians!

**Q: What about Carter’s story stuck with you the most?**

**A:** The scene where young Carter reads the newspaper to a group of coal miners was a powerful moment. Most of these men, I imagine, were illiterate. They learned about life outside the mines through Carter. The message of literacy, and how reading can change lives, is a common theme in both *Carter Reads the Newspaper* and *Poet: The Remarkable Story of George Moses Horton*. The theme of educating oneself also spoke to me.

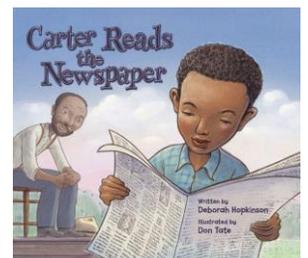
**Q: What do you hope readers take away from the art within the story, and from the book as a whole?**

**A:** Simple: Knowing your history is knowing yourself.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Don Tate is the illustrator of numerous critically-acclaimed books for children, including *Poet: The Remarkable Story of George Moses Horton*. In 2013, he earned an Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Honor Award for his first picture book text, *It Jes' Happened: When Bill Traylor Started to Draw*.

[dontate.com](http://dontate.com)



Written by Deborah Hopkinson  
Illustrated by Don Tate  
HC: 978-1-56145-934-6