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A much-needed window into a little-documented time in black history

Based on an actual memoir written by Maritcha Rémond Lyons, who was born and raised in New York City, this poignant story tells what it was like to be a black child born free during the days of slavery. Everyday experiences are interspersed with high-point moments, such as visiting the U.S.'s first world's fair. Also included are the Draft Riots of 1863, when Maritcha and her siblings fled to Brooklyn while her parents stayed behind to protect their home. The book concludes with her fight to attend a whites-only high school in Providence, Rhode Island, and her triumphant victory, making her the first black person in its graduating class.

The book includes photographs of Maritcha, her family, and friends, as well as archival and contemporary maps, photographs, and illustrations.

Author Bio: Tonya Bolden's books have received acclaim from organizations such as the American Library Association and the New York Public Library, and from publications like *School Library Journal*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *Publishers Weekly*.

Maritcha: A Nineteenth-Century American Girl Details

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From Reader Review *Maritcha: A Nineteenth-Century American Girl* for online ebook

Ashlynn Armstrong says

This book is about a little girl named Maritcha and her life as a free African American girl during the time of slavery. The book follows the girl from the time she is born until she becomes the first African American in her graduating class at an all white school.

This book was super great and very informative on what it was like to be a free African American during the time of slavery. I enjoyed how some of the pictures were actual pictures.

This book would be interesting to discuss with a class because in school I was never taught much on what the free African Americans did during times of slavery.

Deborah says

Maritcha: A Nineteenth-Century American Girl is the perfect example and lesson for middle graders learning about American history, historical research, and primary source documents. After reading the 1928 memoir of Maritcha Remond Lyon, author Tonya Bolden gifted the world with her beautiful life-story, enriching our understanding life and race relations in pre and post civil war lower Manhattan.

Maritcha recalled the wonders of witnessing America's first official baseball game, Knickerbockers vs the New York Nine at the Elysian Fields, and all the admonishments at America's first world fair at the newly constructed Crystal Palace. She explores her rich family history, including her parents' civic roles in the local church community, the political landscape, and how they assisted with the Underground Railroad. There are harrowing episodes, also, such as their terrifying experiences during the draft riots and her family's subsequent flight.

A rewarding and well-researched history for young people.

Treasa says

I don't think I had ever read anything about free blacks in the North during the nineteenth century, so was very interested to read about Maritcha's experiences as a young girl. The use of photographs and illustrations from the time period was very effective. Overall, this was an interesting, well-presented story of a young girl.

For some reason, I just felt that this book was missing something. I didn't really feel as if I had any sort of sense of who Maritcha was. A good biography should make me feel as if I know the person, and I didn't get that feeling here. While her story was very interesting and certainly taught me a lot about that time period, Maritcha herself is still mostly a stranger to me. Nevertheless, it is certainly worth reading.

Alicia says

Almost too short for its own good, the story chronicles the early life of Maritcha who was born in 1848 in New York City. In her later years, she penned a memoir that was roughly kept and then passed to historians, where Bolden took her story as well as others to chronicle black life in the North. Then, she became interested in knowing more about her situation-- how she was raised, what she contributed to society, and what her family did and how they were treated.

It's the story of perseverance through hard work. She was a very humble and very ambitious girl. Bolden tells how she spoke in front of the state legislature to allow her to attend high school after she was denied because she was black. She won and graduated and then went on to teach for nearly fifty years.

I was disappointed that there wasn't a more "final" ending, it seemed like an after thought after learning about her and her family. I felt like I got to know her and then the story finished. Though, what was there is valuable, especially in terms of what her family did for the Underground Railroad, who her relatives and family friends were, and how they were entrepreneurs.

Connie T. says

I enjoyed reading this and the photos are a nice addition. However, I really didn't get a sense of who Maritcha was.

Monique says

This is more of an autobiography than a children's book because of the historical significance and artifacts presented. I learned so much about Mariechia and her family.

Marfita says

I was drawn immediately to the photograph of Maritcha on the cover. I just love old photos and Maritcha looks so lovely and composed. There are several more photos of family members, her sister in what appears to be the exact same dress (or at least fabric and pattern) but seeming more timid.

Maritcha's life begins as a freeborn black child in New York City before the Civil War. Her father and grandfather owned property in Seneca Village, one of the areas razed to make room for Central Park (an area Bill Bryson erroneously referred to as unoccupied in *At Home* and I'm still annoyed about that). There were not many materials available (other than her memoirs) to the author and Bolden made the decision to use contemporary illustrations instead of having modern ones done. This is perfectly understandable and done all the time, but the captions reiterating the "similar to what Maritcha's family" wheeze got annoying. I'm not sure how that could have been handled better.

The story is captivating. There is high adventure during the anti-draft riots and suspense when Maritcha has to plead her own case before the Rhode Island state assembly to be permitted to attend high school. This led to the passage of an act making no distinction on account of race or color for admission to any school in RI. Of course, she still had to take a written and oral examination to prove she was up to it.

The biography only covers her childhood, but Maritcha dedicated her life to teaching and never married. Excellent book. She deserves hero status.

Beckie says

Well-written biography of young black girl who was born mid-1800's in NYC, but was forced to flee to Rhode Island. Bio is written based on Maritcha Remond Lyons' memoirs: *Memories of Yesterdays: All of Which I Saw and Part of Which I Was* (dated 1928). This young girl was gifted with incredible determination to reach her goals.

lola Franco says

what I really liked about this book was that it's a story of a free black girl in new York. for my daughter, and her class, the environment will be very familiar to them, since it's pretty near to where they grew up. it's also great to have a girl who resembles so much of the population.

in social studies they only seem to read about slavery when there was, at least in the north, a pretty substantial free black population. bolden mentions historical figures like Frederick douglass, who are more familiar, and stories about the draft riots, which caused so many problems in manhattan at that time.

Monise says

Upon reading the first few pages, my decision to 'teach' history through literature was confirmed: Books (both fiction and non-fiction) do a better job at generating interest in the thousands of people and topics that have been omitted from traditional textbooks.

This is an amazing story about a family of freed blacks living and prospering in New York before, during, and after the Civil War. Although blacks had more freedoms than slaves, they were not their own set of unique challenges. I would recommend this book for anyone looking to learn something new about our country's history, rather than re-reading the same narratives.

Kimberly says

I am really glad this book exists. It tells the story of a black girl born free during the time of slavery, who lived a life of comparative luxury in New York - a life not unlike that of white girls at the time, except for the few times racism interfered and was conquered.

The author took her information from Maritcha's own un-published autobiography. I would have like to have seen some of that. I'm guessing it was excluded because this book is aimed towards kids, rather than because it was poorly written. Or maybe she couldn't get the rights. Anyway it was a disappointment. But the book, as a whole, would be a wonderful addition to any kid's shelf.

Cheryl says

Fascinating look into the life of a young woman born in 1848 in New York City.

Central Park exists because whole villages were destroyed. Maritcha's grandparents and parents owned property in Seneca Village, along with black, Irish, German and Native American residents. The residents were on their way to building a stable community with 3 churches and a school. Their property was taken because of plans for what one man called "nineteenth-century America's greatest work of art" the 800+ acre Central Park.

I also learned a lot about the Draft Riots (whites were drafted and forced to serve in the Civil War, but the draft could be avoided for \$300, leaving the burden on the poor; non-whites couldn't serve in the military). The anger over the draft flared into a mob, which destroyed property and beat/murdered innocent people. Maritcha's German neighbor was beaten after his role in helping her parents to safety from the mob was discovered.

Sixteen year old Maritcha had to speak before the Rhode Island State legislature to plead for the right to go to high school. After segregated schools were banned, she finished high school and went on to become a teacher and a principal.

This interesting and informative book is text-rich and for advanced readers. It is full of pictures and art from the period of time and provides a great glimpse into the time period. Kudos to the author and editors for bringing Maritcha's story to light.

David Benjamin says

Summary: I really can't make this sound interesting. I have thought about it for about 10 minutes, but I can't make it sound too interesting. If you are a fan of biographies then you will enjoy this book as you follow Maritcha and her family within New York/ modern day Manhattan.

Analysis: Within the picture book biography, we see pictures of her, her family, and some of the things she was a part of throughout her life. The book doesn't feel like a story told through words, but it felt as if it was told to me through different comments said. The author also makes notes like "We don't know if she had a diary, but we are still looking for it" or something quite similar to it. This book has plenty of pictures with text to explain what the pictures are doing; the pictures don't necessarily reflect the text, but sometimes is mentioned within it. Overall, I did enjoy the book, but just a little bit boring.

Salsabrarian says

This book was inspired by a typewritten memoir the author discovered at the Schomburg Center. Maritcha grew up in lower Manhattan where her family ran a boarding house that was part of the city's "striving class of blacks in the mid 1800s." Maritcha loved school and study. But a violent riot over the Civil War draft chased thousands of blacks from NYC, including Maritcha's family which settled in Rhode Island. The

never-married Maritcha went on to become a teacher in Brooklyn.

Abby says

Would also be a good non-fiction resource for teens reading Zetta Elliott's *A Wish After Midnight*

Sunday Cummins says

I found this book when I started searching other titles by one of my “go to” authors Tonya Bolden. The book is put together in a way I’d like to explore with 4th-6th grade students. The author’s purpose is to tell the story of Maritcha’s childhood in New York City as a free-black during the mid-1800’s AND to describe the people, places, events that Maritcha “may have” experienced based on other historical artifacts, writings of that period. For example, Bolden knows that Maritcha’s grandmother met Frederick Douglass once – so she describes who he was and his role in the anti-slavery movement. You see where I am going? Maritcha’s childhood is a frame of sorts for learning about that period of time.

Bolden’s main primary source is an autobiography Maritcha wrote the year before she died and then additional sources were dug up and researched further by Bolden. The text is rich with well-chosen primary sources – photographs, illustrations, publications and so forth. Bolden is careful to use “qualifiers” when writing about what Maritcha may have experienced like (put words in bold)-

"As for play, make-believe games with dolls, a spinning top, ring toss, and making a clackety-clack dance with a Limber Jack may have ranked high among Maritcha’s delights." (p. 8)

When Bolden knows for sure that something happened – based on her research – she does not use the qualifier language, but instead states it as a matter of fact.

As periods of history are being pushed further down in the grades, I think that books like Maritcha –with a focus on the Civil War and anti-slavery movement and the life of a free black during this period – would be developmentally appropriate and rigorous as a read aloud. Place the book on the document camera so students can view the primary sources as you read aloud. Or book talk it and place it in a text set for independent reading during a particular unit of study.

AND WRITING – a discussion of Bolden’s organization and use of primary sources and so forth could serve as a launch for students researching and writing their own historical narratives – fiction or nonfiction, making arguments about the life of a free black, writing informational pieces on particular aspects of this period. Oh, the possibilities!

Lots and lots of potential.

There are several places you could read aloud or excerpt a paragraph for close reading and discuss the author’s main idea and textual evidence or discuss how an author develops an idea. There are three paragraphs on page 20 that begin with the following:

"What enabled Maritcha to endure whatever the weather? True grit. And she had plenty of examples around

her."

What follows are a description of her godfather's grit, another remarkable community member's grit, and her parents' grit. One of the author's ideas here is that these people influenced and shaped Maritcha in many ways (RI 5.3). Students might explain how the author makes the case that Maritcha had several examples of grit in her life (RI 5.8). Students might analyze how first two sentences in this excerpt contribute to the development of the main idea (RI 6.5) and so forth. Some good discussion could happen here.

For more thoughts on this book (with instructional recommendations) visit my blog entry at <http://sundaycummins.wordpress.com/20....>

Becky says

I really liked this book, it is just an amazing story. What I liked best about this book is that it is the story of a person that I believe is not well known all over the country, but it is apparent from her life that she had a hugely positive impact on many people. She become a successful educator and had the chance to pass on her experiences to young boys and girls in her community. It is also very special that the biography used quotes from Maritcha's life from the memoirs she wrote. This biography has made me want to do a unit on biographies of lesser known people. Many people, like Maritcha, have overcome struggles, boundaries, and social injustice to do what other people get to do without those hurdles. She may not be known to all school children, but she clearly made an impact on the author and people she lead at school. I will definitely be introducing this book to students.

Gretchen says

I always find myself in the children's section of the library, well, with my children. I do find some fascinating books and this book is included as one fascinating read.

Maritcha: A Nineteenth-Century American Girl is an account of the life of an African American girl born free in New York in 1848. Author Tonya Bolden tells part of Maritcha's story using her unpublished memoir and historical details about her family and life in New York and New England, including the Draft Riots of 1863.

A quick read that enriched my understanding of American History although I wish the book included more from Maritcha's memoir.

Laura Flicek says

The book had a lot of intriguing and factual information. However, this picture book in my opinion is very dense. Although the pictures are colorful and big, the print is small and there are 34 pages with at least 300 words on every page. This is not a book that a teacher could read to the class, but instead a student would need to choose specific sections to read, or read the whole book over a period of time. The youngest age-group for this book would be fourth grade, in my opinion.

Amy Rae says

An incredibly charming work of non-fiction, with great pictures! I could seriously look at the portraits of Maritcha's family all day, they're such lovely photographs. My only real complaint is a silly, minor one: I hate, hate, hate the fonts used in this book. They're decorative enough to be distracting and they don't match each other in weight or style, enough so that I found the book weirdly hard to read. If they'd just used plainer typesetting, I'd probably give this book five stars.
