



My Name Is James Madison Hemings

Jonah Winter , Terry Widener (Illustrations)

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Here's a powerful historical picture book about the child of founding father Thomas Jefferson and the enslaved Sally Hemings.

In an evocative first-person account accompanied by exquisite artwork, Winter and Widener tell the story of James Madison Hemings's childhood at Monticello, and, in doing so, illuminate the many contradictions in Jefferson's life and legacy. Though Jefferson lived in a mansion, Hemings and his siblings lived in a single room. While Jefferson doted on his white grandchildren, he never showed affection to his enslaved children. Though he kept the Hemings boys from hard field labor—instead sending them to work in the carpentry shop—Jefferson nevertheless listed the children in his “Farm Book” along with the sheep, hogs, and other property. Here is a profound and moving account of one family's history, which is also America's history.

An author's note includes more information about Hemings, Jefferson, and the author's research.

My Name Is James Madison Hemings Details

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Author : Jonah Winter , Terry Widener (Illustrations)

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From Reader Review My Name Is James Madison Hemings for online ebook

June says

A good discussion starter on how Thomas Jefferson kept his children by Sally Hemings as slaves. These children were just one eighth African, making them fair-skinned and legally "white" according to the laws of Virginia in the early 1800s.

Maria says

What must it have been like to learn that your father, one of the greatest men in the county, to be your owner? To establish that you are his property, just as much as his furniture and farm animals? To live together with your mother and siblings in one room under the house when your half-siblings and cousins got to stay in lavish rooms above ground? And what must it have been like to keep it a secret who your father is? To know that he will one day free you, but not your mother? Not the other enslaved people you work side-by-side each day? Winter gives us an idea in this excellently done, but emotionally challenging book.

Maggie says

This is an outstanding picture book that introduces young children to the issue of slavery and family histories as a result of that institution. James Madison Hemings is one of Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson's children and this is Madison's story. Pair this with Jefferson's Children by Lanier and Feldman.

Mary Lee says

Pair this with Ashely Byran's Freedom Over Me. Hard truths, but I refuse to shy away from them. American's need to know this history, own this history, never repeat this history.

Allie says

Really powerful long picture book about reckoning with history. I'm actually going to try and booktalk this to a group of 3rd and 4th graders today...

Jamie says

I think this is a perfectly (and beautifully) written and illustrated biography of Thomas Jefferson's & his slave, Sally Hemings's, son, and the very disturbing and complex life he led as an enslaved child of his own

father. It is sensitive to the young audience but does not hide the horrible truth of slavery or the fact that one of our most revered Founding Fathers was unforgivably flawed (to say the least).

The impressionist art is gorgeous.

Chris says

Here is a picture book for older readers (we need more of them!) that doesn't tiptoe around the truth. Yippee, Jonah Winters! Beautifully told from the point-of-view of James Madison Hemings as a child, he tells how he feels to be "owned" by his father, treated a bit better than the other slaves at Monticello, but nowhere near like Jefferson treated his white grandchildren. Terry Widener's illustrations are right-on, perfect for the text. Usually Jonah Winter's mother, Jeanette, does his illustrations, but as much as I LOVE her work, I really like the way this book is presented as a whole. It was a brave topic to be tackled for a children's picture book and Jonah Winter did an admirable job.

Debbie Graham says

Very well written BUT should not be put in biography. As the author notes, it is historical fiction. We have enough problems with truthiness in this society. This story does need to be widely shared but kids also need to learn that this is an interpretation, not verbatim quotes.

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

Can you imagine your father also owning you as a slave? James Madison Hemings was the son of founding father and third President of the USA Thomas Jefferson and a slave whom he owned, Sally Hemings. Winter cleverly tells this story in the first person, from James' point of view, so that readers can feel the psychological and emotional impact of having a father who owns you and doesn't acknowledge you as his child. So sad, wanting and needing a father's love and approval, and never getting it. In addition, James and his siblings, who according to the author's note at the end of the book, were recently verified via DNA testing to definitely be Jefferson's children, could easily have passed as white. Since not a lot is known about James' life, Winter tells us in the author's note what he invented and which facts are verified in the story. Apparently James' relationship to Jefferson wasn't publicly known until he gave a newspaper interview in 1873. I do like that the narrator, James, doesn't reveal until the end of the book the identity of his father, keeping the reader shocked that a father would treat his child that way, and then even more shocked to discover that that father was someone so famous. Winter cleverly places on those final pages illustrations of both Jefferson and James, so that readers can clearly see the family resemblance. This excellent book should make young readers think. Highly recommended!

Heidi says

Well-done historical fiction. Gorgeous illustrations.

Stephanie Tournas says

This is a powerful historical fiction memoir of James Hemings, whom historians believe to be a son of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Although Jefferson never directly acknowledged his paternity, Hemings and his siblings were freed upon Jefferson's death, having lived the lives of enslaved persons. The author imagines the interactions with Jefferson based on known events. The thoughtful telling of the memoir in the voice of the adult Hemings is respectful of Jefferson, while acknowledging the hypocrisy of slavery, which Jefferson publicly decried. The tone of the writing is narrative, and not preachy, nor talking down to a children's audience. The realistic acrylic illustrations are evocative of Hemings memories as an adult, and picture life at Monticello as two distinct societies, that of a privileged white family and the enslaved people, both family and not. This is a stellar addition to units on the founding fathers and mothers of the American republic.

Aspasia says

This originally appeared on a Non-Fiction for Youth discussion board for my Children's Literature class

In the article, "How Nonfiction Reveals the Nature of Science," the authors caution against selecting science books that contain "idealized descriptions of scientists as heroic and larger than life" (Zarnowski and Turkel, 2013, p. 298). This same advice could also be used when selecting nonfiction materials related to the Founding Fathers of the United States, of which Thomas Jefferson was one. Jefferson has been memorialized as a president and author of our nation's founding document, The Declaration of Independence. This memorialization in text and architecture (the Jefferson Memorial) glosses over the more disturbing details of Jefferson's life. Like all of us, he was imperfect, but after reading this book, he could also be viewed as hypocritical too (or some will argue, a man of his time). In the Author's Note, Jonah Winter states that "Jefferson's life and legacy are full of contradictions" (Winter, 2016, p. 31), which is putting the contradictions in Jefferson's personal life and public politics, quite mildly!

In *My Name is James Madison Hemings*, we read about Jefferson's son was born into slavery due to the slave status of his mother, Sally Hemings. We read about James' efforts to reconcile that his master was also his father, and that he would never receive the same amount of love or education that Jefferson's white children and grandchildren received. Although James, his mother, and his siblings were slaves, they were spared some of the harsher parts of slave life due to their biological connection to Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson spared the Hemings family from participating in backbreaking field labor, gave the Hemmings boys violins, and let the Hemings children learn to read and write, in a time when it was illegal to educate slaves in any manner.

There is debate nowadays on whether the relationship between Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson was consensual or not. While this book doesn't talk about that aspect of the Hemings/Jefferson relationship, the book tells us that Sally and her children were relocated from the slaves' quarters to the dependencies- rooms near a smokehouse and the horse stables. Moving the Hemings family to the section of Monticello where animals lived and died was an act of kindness with a double meaning; this relocation could be interpreted that the Hemings were viewed in a liminal status by Jefferson: not animals, but not quite human either. After Jefferson died, his children were freed from the bonds of slavery, but Sally, their mother, was not.

Although the author notes that he “presented this story in a first-person narrative as historical fiction” (Winter, 2016, p. 31), the spine label on my library copy says, “J B Hemings” for Juvenile Biography. If I were to recommend this book to someone, I would tell them not to be fooled by the slimness of the text. Although the book may be small in pages, the content within is intense for a children’s book. I would recommend this for an older elementary child due to the serious content of the book. The impressionistic art style of the illustrations mirrors James’ uncertainty about his father’s affections and his own place in the world.

You can read more about Sally Hemings and her legacy at the Monticello website.

Readalikes:

Lift Your Light a Little Higher: The Story of Stephen Bishop: Slave-Explorer by Heather Henson. (Synopsis from Kirkus Reviews): “This story whispers of the life of a man most contemporary American readers should know but don’t. Stephen Bishop, born circa 1821, had intimate knowledge of Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, where he served as guide for visitors who traveled far to tour the underground passageways. Despite the ban against teaching slaves to read, Stephen acquired literacy and wrote his name on the ceiling of Mammoth Cave by using smoke from a lighted candle. Henson weaves Bishop’s impressive scientific discoveries of cave life into the sparse narrative, demonstrating the magnitude of his contributions despite that little is known of his life or death...A story that recovers an important piece of African-American history inextricably tied to the history of Mammoth Cave, a national monument visited by 2 million people each year.”

Schomburg: The Man Who Built a Library by Carole Boston Weatherford. (Synopsis from Kirkus Reviews): “An eccentric, smart, and quirky bibliophile, Arturo Schomburg fueled his life with books. This picture book of free verse poems, lavishly illustrated in oils, opens with stories from Schomburg’s childhood in Puerto Rico, where he constantly asked why the history of black people had been left out of all the history books. Answering him, framed, date-stamped panels, appearing primarily on the right sides of the double-page spreads throughout, capture the stories of important historical black figures such as Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, and Paul Cuffee. The poem “Whitewash” will surprise some readers; Schomburg objected to the common practice of omitting from biographies the African heritage of prominent individuals such as naturalist and ornithologist John James Audubon, French writer Alexandre Dumas, Russian poet Alexander Pushkin, and German composer Ludwig van Beethoven. Alongside these, Schomburg’s personal and professional life unfolds in unframed images. Schomburg worked as a mail clerk with Banker’s Trust; his book-collecting and library building resulted from his life’s passion, not his vocation. All of the book’s details paint Schomburg as an admirable, flawed, likable, passionate man whose lasting legacy, Harlem’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, opens its doors to all who would learn more about the people its founder knew had been left out of the written record. A must-read for a deeper understanding of a well-connected genius who enriched the cultural road map for African-Americans and books about them.”

Citations:

Kirkus Reviews, (2016, June 28). *Lift your light a little higher*. Retrieved from <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-re...>

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Buffy Rochard says

It was an odd (complicated, controversial, and somewhat inappropriate) topic to cover in a children's picture book. Beyond that, there wasn't a lot to the book, not much to interest young readers and no particularly novel perspective to engage older children. If you have a child that you feel is old enough to explore this topic, Jefferson's Sons did a much more in depth and interesting job of it.

Holly says

I love this author, and I love this book. It's a sad, quiet story told from the perspective of one of Thomas Jefferson's sons/slaves. I am embarrassed to say that I always assumed Jonah Winter was black because most of his children's books are about famous (or not-so-famous) people of color. I noticed the dedication to Ta-Nehisi Coates in this book, which led me to look for more about Jonah Winter. Turns out he's a white man who was raised in the segregated south before moving to New York.

My search led me to an interview from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette in 2008. I love this quote: "As a nonfiction children's book writer, I see it as my job to educate children about historical figures who are either under-reported in the curriculum or else who, like Muhammad Ali or Roberto Clemente, were mavericks in standing up to a racist culture and carving a path for other members of their respective cultures. If I can make a difference in raising the tolerance and knowledge levels of today's children, then I feel as if I'm doing my job."

KC says

This is the biography of James Madison Hemings, the alleged son of Thomas Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemings.
