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Book review: The Oldest Student (Literacy - Not Just for Elementary School)

Megan R. Brown
Cedarville University, meganbrown@cedarville.edu

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Book Review: Hubbard, R. L., & Mora, O. (2020). *The Oldest Student: How Mary Walker Learned to Read* (First edition.). Schwartz and Wade Books.

Dr. Megan Brown

In 1962, Mary Walker entered a classroom to learn how to read. It might seem like a typical action until the reader knows that Mary was 114 years old, and the classroom was in her retirement home. In *The Oldest Student: How Mary Walker Learned to Read*, Ritta Lorraine Hubbard presents the true story of a woman who grew up as a slave in Alabama without the time or access to education. While not much is known about Mary's life between her emancipation at age 15 and retirement years at age 116, the book describes Mary's lifelong desire to read, stymied by her constant requirement to work for survival. A fictionalized biography woven together with factual events, Hubbard's book ultimately presents this universal message: "You're never too old to learn."

Formerly a special educator, Hubbard understands diverse readers and clearly presents Mary's life story in an engaging narrative format. Her writing style moves the reader fluidly between personal life events and historical moments in the history of the United States. The first half of the book presents all of Mary's past life until she turns 114 years old, including emancipation, interactions with the Freedmen's Bureau, sharecropping, domestic service, and the Chattanooga Great Flood. The second half of the book focuses on her steps toward being literate, including her learning of the alphabet for the first time and the subsequent process toward literacy. For example, the US Department of Education declared her "the nation's oldest student," and two different Presidents honored her. Since the book has some fictionalized biographical elements, Hubbard also included an author's note that describes the factual details of Mary's life to clarify any authorial choices.

Hubbard strategically included a bookend moment where she equates flying with the ability to read. At the beginning of the book, birds are flying over her slave owner's fields while Mary is working. She considers "that must be what it's like to be free." In 1966, she was able to fly in an airplane, and Hubbard connects that flight to her new skill – "Mary decided that flying was a lot like reading: they both made a body feel as free as a bird." These two moments cleverly highlight the importance of reading and the resulting feeling of accomplishment.

Oge Mora, the book's illustrator, used collage to represent the moments in Mary's life. On each page, Mora incorporated a variety of textures and colors. She also included written words intentionally throughout the illustrations that visually demonstrate Mary's underlying desire to read and progression toward literacy. To represent Mary's inability to read words early on in the story, Mora used scribbles for environmental words that Mary might attempt to decode, like street signs and billboards. After she learned to read, words were written clearly with letters. Beyond this special depiction of letters, the illustrations also showed Mary's emotions. During the first half of the book, Mora showed Mary's sad feelings through simple facial expressions, a choice that changed once she attained literacy. This subtle message of the power of reading

brings to light how often it is an assumed ability that provides so much access to the world. Mora also includes actual photographs of Mary in her last thirty years as she was learning to read and celebrating life.

While the focus of the book is on Mary's life, Hubbard stresses the importance of being able to access scripture through literacy. The middle of the narrative includes a key moment when an evangelist gives fifteen-year-old Mary a Bible. The woman told her, "Civil Rights are in these pages," but Mary simply saw the Bible as a book of words that she could not read. Hubbard points out that Mary was an active church member, who still kept the Bible with her throughout her life. The author's note shares that "it is a fact that her Bible waited 101 years for her to learn to read it!" Thus, Hubbard stresses the importance of accessing scripture. After Mary learns to read, Hubbard writes that "whenever she was lonely, she read from her Bible," and at her birthday celebrations, the attendees would stand around while Mary would read from God's Word. Reading the Word of God should be one of the key reasons for people to learn to read, and this book celebrates that access to the power of scripture as outlined in 2 Tim. 3:16-17.

The Oldest Student is a beautiful biographical depiction of the importance of reading. Selected as an ALSC Notable Children's Book, Hubbard's text and Mora's pictures celebrate the life of one woman who overcame the struggles of life to access words, especially the most important words found in the Word of God. This book is appropriate for all ages, but especially for those who are also working to learn to read.

Keywords: book review, reading, biography, scripture