

# THE OLDEST STUDENT

HOW MARY WALKER  
LEARNED TO READ

RITA  
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&

CALDECOTT HONOR WINNER  
OGE MORA





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By Rita Lorraine Hubbard

Illustrated by Oge Mora

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Imagine learning to read at the age of 116! Discover the true story of Mary Walker, the nation's oldest student who did just that, in this picture book from a Caldecott Honor-winning illustrator and a rising-star author.

In 1848, Mary Walker was born into slavery. At age fifteen, she was freed, and by age twenty, she was married and had had her first child. By age sixty-eight, she had worked numerous jobs,

including as a cook, cleaner, babysitter, and sandwich seller. At 114, she was the last remaining member of her family—she had outlived her children. And at 116, she learned to read. From Rita Lorraine Hubbard and Oge Mora comes the inspirational story of Mary Walker, a woman whose long life stretched from the Civil War to the civil rights movement, and who—with perseverance and dedication—proved that you're never too old to learn.

## Projects for before reading, during reading, and after reading

### *The Oldest Student: How Mary Walker Learned to Read*

#### **The Years of Mary Walker's Life**

Mary Walker lived from 1848 to 1969. During that time, many important events happened in the United States. Create a classroom timeline that spans Mary Walker's lifetime, and have students form small groups. Each group will be responsible for a decade, and should find important events to put on their part of the timeline. They can do research in print books, online, or through interviews, depending on their skill levels. Have students discuss what Mary Walker lived through and the effects that different historical events had on her life.

#### **Putting the Pieces Together**

The collages in *The Oldest Student* use colored pencil, paint, china markers, and many colored and patterned papers, some with words on them. The pictures show objects from everyday life: people, birds, houses, roads, planes, books, and more. Invite students to spend time studying the illustrations closely and then make their own, using a similar method. Have them gather different papers and newspapers, perhaps painting paper with patterns and colors to cut. They should create a collage modeled after Oge Mora's work, showing a scene from the world around them. Display the collages for everyone to see.

#### **The Power of Reading**

When Mary Walker was around eight years old, before the Civil War, she worked and lived as a slave on a plantation. She learned to abide by certain rules, one of which was "slaves should not be taught to read or write, or do anything that might help them learn to do so." Hold a class discussion in which students talk about the barriers Mary Walker faced. Have them discuss why plantation owners wanted to prevent slaves from reading. What were the owners afraid of? What power and knowledge would reading have given the slaves?

#### **Up She Goes**

The first airplane flight by the Wright brothers was in 1903, when Mary Walker was about fifty-five. But she didn't fly in an airplane until 1966, when she was 118! Drawing from the book as well as from their own imaginations, ask students to write a short letter describing the flight. The letters can discuss how Mary felt ahead of time, what she saw, how the flight felt physically and emotionally, and more. Share the letters with the class.





## Group project after reading

### *The Oldest Student: How Mary Walker Learned to Read*

#### **The Key to the City**

Mary Walker lived in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and was given the key to the city twice. This honor is bestowed by the mayor, who presents the key and gives a speech about the designated recipient. Ask students to work in pairs to write a short speech about Mary Walker and why she deserved this honor. They should use the questions below as well as their own thoughts to make notes about what to say in their speech. Invite students to deliver their speeches to small groups or to the class.

Who was Mary Walker?

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What did she accomplish in her lifetime?

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Why do her accomplishments matter?

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What obstacles did she face?

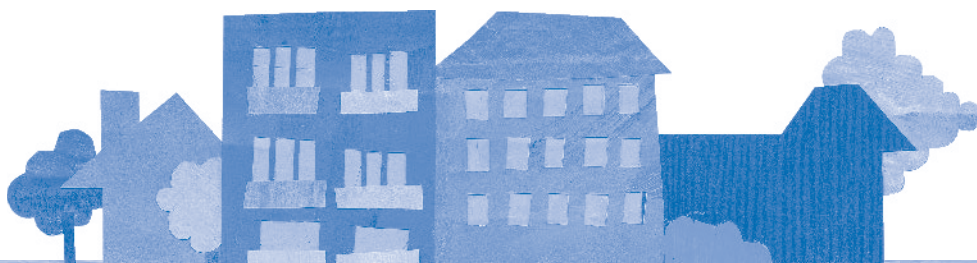
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What admirable qualities did she embody?

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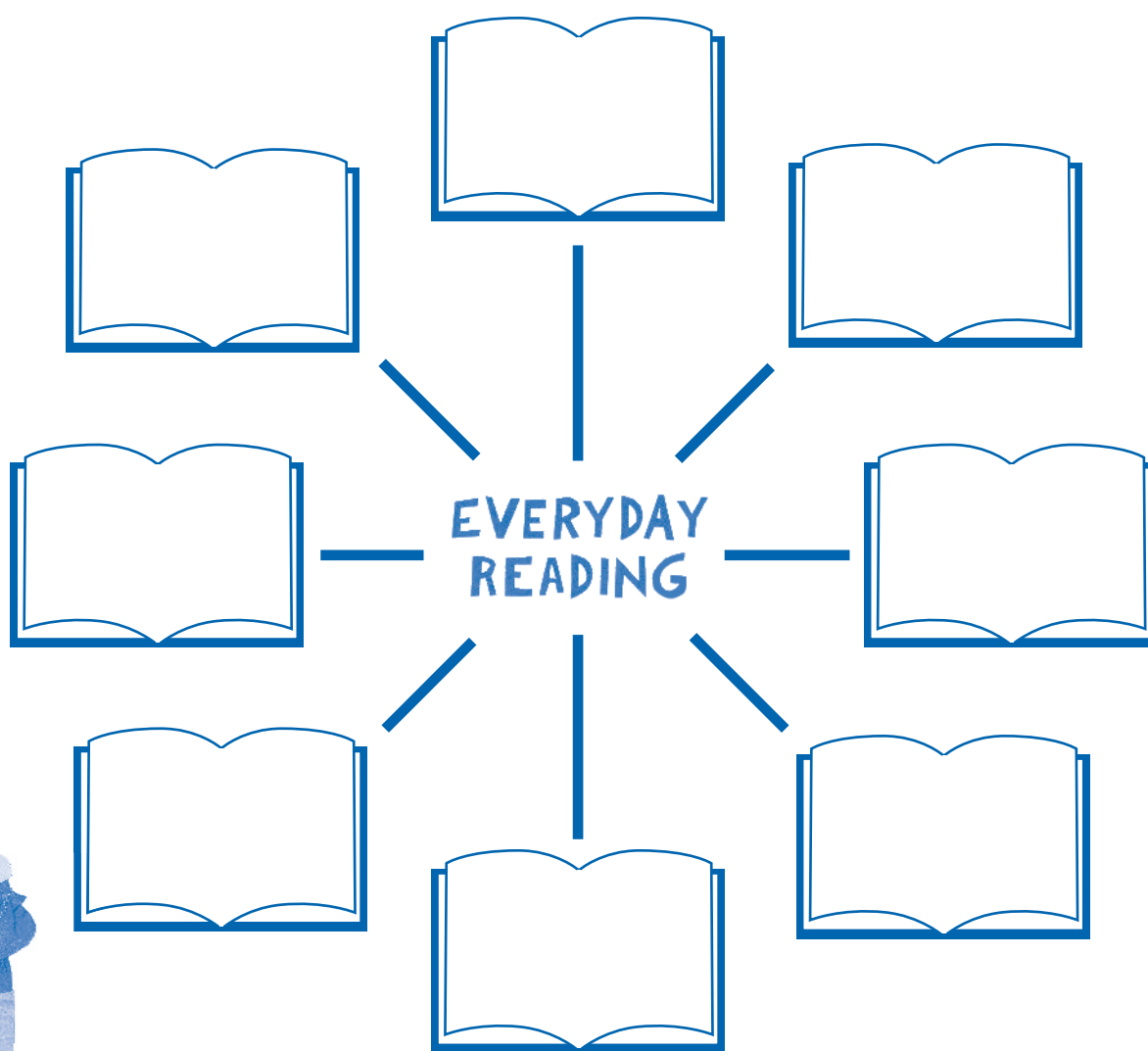


## Group project after reading

### *The Oldest Student: How Mary Walker Learned to Read*

#### Reading in Everyday Life

What would life be like if you were an adult who couldn't read? Ask students to take notice of how important reading is in everyday life. They should look for specific examples, and discuss the topic with friends and relatives. Have them consider when reading is required and when it is useful. In groups, have students fill in a graphic organizer with their examples. Then have students reflect on the activity by answering: Why is the ability to read important?



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This guide was created by Kathleen Odean.