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Margarita Engle , Julie Paschke (Illustrator)

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This is the story of one young girl who took the time to observe and learn, and in so doing disproved a theory that went all the way back to ancient Greece.

Summer Birds: The Butterflies of Maria Merian Details

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From Reader Review *Summer Birds: The Butterflies of Maria Merian* for online ebook

Abigail says

Contrary to the popular belief of those around her, thirteen-year-old Maria Merian - a seventeenth-century German girl with a talent for painting and an inquisitive mind - did not believe that butterflies and other insects were creatures "of the devil," spawned from mud in a process known as spontaneous generation. Having carefully observed these smaller creatures, from their larval through adult stages, and painstakingly documented them in her notes and drawings, Maria knew that they underwent an astonishing process known as metamorphosis, and that they were as harmless as they were beautiful.

Maria Sibylla Merian, a late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century artist and scientist, one who documented the life-cycle of one hundred and eighty-six insect species, and whose botanical illustrations are still beloved today, is a fascinating figure. Her travels to Suriname, and her documentation of the flora and fauna there, are astonishing enough for their time, but when one considers the restrictions placed on so many women during this period, they are all the more amazing! I am so glad that this picture-book "biography" (it's really more story than biography) is available, as both narrative and artwork are immensely engaging. I simply loved Julie Paschkis' gorgeous illustrations!

That said, a pretty glaring factual error prevents me from giving this the four stars it would otherwise deserve. No, contrary to the dust jacket blurb (and the book description found all over the internet), Merian did not live in the "Middle Ages!" I don't know where the editor was on that one, since the informational afterword gives her dates (1647-1717), and the medieval period is generally agreed to have ended in the fifteenth century! Such a misleading statement, in a book meant to inform young readers, is most unfortunate, and I therefore recommend *Summer Birds* only to children reading *with* an informed adult, who can point out this odd inaccuracy.

Kathryn says

"In the Middle Ages, people believed that insects were evil, born from mud in a process called spontaneous generation. Maria Merian was only a child, but she disagreed."

I love the idea behind this true story!* Maria was drawn to insects, especially butterflies, and couldn't believe that they were creations of the devil. (She also studied tadpoles and frogs.) She had to be very sneaky in capturing some to study because if people saw her doing it, she would be accused of witchcraft! She watched the caterpillars spin their cocoons and waited for them to transform into beautiful "summer birds" and she knew that the people who said they came from mud were wrong. But, being a child--and a girl, at that!--it would take a long time before she would be able to prove it to them. I was so happy to read the Afterward and find that she did! Hooray!

I'm not sure that the storytelling here really wowed me, but I'm glad Maria's story is available to younger readers. This is an important book not just because it shows a courageous early woman scientist but because it shares the message that we should not believe things to be evil simply because others say so; we must try to understand them ourselves and then decide.

The illustrations are noteworthy and have a distinctive Middle Ages flavor and really enhance the story, IMO. That said, some children might find them a little scary/creepy at times (the devilish creatures in the mud and whatnot) but I appreciated them.

*ETA: a comment made on my friend Lisa's review stated that Maria Merian actually lived in the late-17th century; a quick online search for her bio. revealed this to be true: she lived from April 2, 1647 – January 13, 1717. Hugely unfortunate that the advertising about this picture book biography places her in the "Middle Ages" and I really do not know why they chose to do so :-/ That doesn't take away from the lovely illustrations or that Maria was still a very inspiring figure so just pay careful attention to the dates and not the "In the Middle Ages" that is so prominently displayed with regard to this book.

SamZ says

This had such a different story, I loved it!

Manybooks says

When I heard that there actually exists a picture book fictional (auto)biography of the girlhood of famous German naturalist and artist Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717), I immediately purchased a copy for my personal library. And while for the most part, I have quite enjoyed Margarita Engle's Summer Birds, I do and with considerable annoyance find that there is a rather problematic lack of historical accuracy portrayed at times. Maria Sibylla Merian lived in the 17th and early 18th century, and while there definitely was still quite a bit of rampant superstition especially regarding insects and other non vertebrates (and so-called spontaneous generation, with insects and worms supposedly generating out of mud and the like), there was also a great deal more openness than in, say, the Middle Ages (and why the Summer Birds book description actually places Merian in the Middle Ages, or at least seems to, I will NEVER even remotely understand and accept). For while Maria Sibylla Merian (indeed) was regarded with suspicion by some if not even many of her neighbours and acquaintances, she also did not have quite as tough and as problematic a time as portrayed either in the historical note or in the narrative itself (and actually had a very supportive family). Thus Margarita Engle's lack of textual accuracy and the at times over dramatisation of Maria Merian's issues and struggles with her suspicious neighbours and acquaintances is a bit of an annoying and frustrating turn-off for me (not a huge turn-off, as I still think Summer Birds is a lovely, informative and engaging account of a talented and inquisitive late 17th century German girl, but enough of a frustration for me to only award two and half stars for Summer Birds, well actually two stars, as half stars are not possible on Goodreads).

Now with regard to Julie Paschkis's accompanying illustrations, while they are bright and descriptive, I personally would MUCH RATHER see Maria Sibylla Merian's own illustrations utilised for at least the depictions of the butterflies (and personally, I think it is rather an insult to her talent and her legacy as an artist that they are not used, that no illustrations of her own work actually are included, are presented in Summer Birds). Furthermore, I also do tend to find that the physical depictions of Maria Merian herself make her look rather more Dutch than German (but that is a personal observation and feeling, others might not think thus, and the illustrations are truly a visual treat in many ways). Recommended, but with the caveat that historical accuracy might be lacking more than a bit (and the scope of the same cannot even be checked or verified, as Margaret Engle has also not included any lists of works cited and consulted, a serious academic shortcoming which rather majorly limits the teaching and learning scope and potential of Summer

Birds, and is one of the main reasons that my two and half star ranking is rounded down to two stars and not rounded up to three stars).

Dolly says

This is a simple, but true, tale of a young girl who enjoyed studying creatures and nature and refused to accept the scientific beliefs of her time. The narrative is short and even younger children will appreciate the wonders of looking at caterpillars and butterflies, learning about the life cycles of these creatures. And our girls liked the fact that it was a young girl who discovered the truth.

The illustrations are very bold and bright and will appeal to children of all ages. I had never heard of Maria before, and after reading other reviews, I was surprised that she is so well-known in Europe and not here. I'm glad that we had an opportunity to learn about her fascinating life and adventurous spirit. We enjoyed reading this book together.

This story was selected as one of the books for the January 2013 - Books about Artists discussion at the Picture-Book Club in the Children's Books Group here at Goodreads.

Jenny says

I enjoyed this but didn't love it. My children and I did really enjoy the illustration right after she says "Sometimes I think that I am like a summer bird, waiting to fly..." Then on the next page she is pictured with butterfly wings and a sail boat is pictured with butterfly wings and so on...very beautiful and whimsical. I thought the story telling was interesting but not awe-inspiring and it is disappointing that her author's note was not more accurate. Maria Meridan lived in the late 1700's not the Middle Ages. Still worth reading and learning about her courage and scientific findings.

Joanne Roberts says

Very beautiful illustrations in this narrative biography of a German girl during the Enlightenment. Facts are expectedly light, but story is written in a way which makes the great scientific discoveries of a fifteen year old seem just as attainable today. A good introduction to the scientific method, too, for young readers.

Randie D. Camp, M.S. says

Hmmm...I am not quite sure what my reaction to this book is. I have always been fascinated with history, so that aspect of the book was interesting to me but overall, I just did not get into it the story. I didn't really dislike the book either but I do think it is a bit odd that a book about this great artist would have so-so illustrations...I feel like if the illustrations could have captured the time period or showcased some of Merian's actual art or just had some more inspiring illustrations, perhaps the concept would have felt more right...but it's not entirely wrong either. Odd. I would recommend the book to others; I think it is just a personal preference issue.

*This book could be used to discuss life cycles.

Lisa Vegan says

The historical note at the end really shows what an amazing girl and woman Maria Sibylla Merian was. While reading the book I thought a Middle Ages girl having her dreams wasn't very realistic, but it turns out she fulfilled those dreams, and it showed me yet again that people are people, no matter when or where they live or have lived.

I have really mixed feelings about this book. I both greatly appreciated and felt lukewarm about the illustrations. Difficult to explain, but I was ambivalent.

The real story of this girl is inspiring, and I appreciate how it shows kids that kids can do unique things, if they study what interests them. Personally, I am not an insect fan; I'm not even a butterfly lover. So, I didn't feel any amazing sense of awe about this book's subject matter. But, I do think it's a good book to teach kids about metamorphosis in the animal kingdom. And the way the story was told wasn't scintillating for me, but I think I'd have liked it more as a child, and this book's target audience is children. Despite its more advanced nature, I recommend that the historical note or its information be read/imparted to even younger listeners. I'd say this book is ideal for children ages 5-8. I was fascinated by butterflies, frogs, etc. when very young; my feelings of repulsion came much later, so thumbs up for nature and science loving kids.

But Maria and her supportive family, and the information about Middle Ages beliefs was all interesting.

3-1/2 stars

Edited to add: 1/2 star off. In fact, 2-1/2 stars, so really a full star off, but I'll leave it rated as a 3 star book. Please see the comments below, particularly the information Miriam gave me after I'd written this review.

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

What amazed me when I read this book is that people could actually believe that insects and reptiles and amphibians could "spontaneously generate" from mud! Maria Merian was a 17th-century girl who painted and studied insects and small animals, observing their life cycles and noting that they were *not* born from mud. "Summer birds" refers to the medieval slang for butterflies, who seemed to appear during the warm months and disappear, seemingly into the mud, when it got cold. I wanted to give this book by award-winner Margarita Engle 4 stars, but I found the text a bit confusing. A note just before the story begins, about the medieval origin of the term "summer birds," leads you to believe the story will take place in medieval times. The simple clothing worn by the characters could indicate medieval through early 19th century, especially in a rural setting. The printing press toward the end of the story narrows it down to 16th to early 19th century. Julie Paschkis' illustrations are as colorful as the butterflies, but she uses medieval-style artwork whenever medieval ideas are mentioned (another false indicator of when the story takes place). It isn't until the note about Maria at the end of the book that we find out she lived in the 17th century, and in fact, that we even learn her (the narrator's) name. That aside, I found the book most interesting, and would love to read more about this person. Where does Engle come up with these obscure people? Recommended with the recommendation that the last page of biographical information about Maria be read first.

Christy says

In the Middle Ages, people believed that insects were evil, born from mud in a process called spontaneous generation. Maria Merian was only a child, but she disagreed. She watched carefully as caterpillars spun themselves cocoons, which opened to reveal summer birds, or butterflies and moths. Maria studied the whole life cycle of the summer birds, and documented what she learned in vibrant paintings.

This is the story of one young girl who took the time to observe and learn, and in so doing disproved a theory that went all the way back to ancient Greece.

Lynn says

I somehow missed this when it came out in 2010. Having read Joyce Sidman's *The Girl Who Drew Butterflies*, my Bookends writing partner and I wanted to track down some of the other books listed in the bibliography.

This one is simple and perfect for a young child, introducing Merian and her discoveries. Julie Paschke's illustrations are exquisite and have the feel of an illustrated manuscript.

Happily, something about Maria Merian's life has inspired some gorgeous books! Make sure you find this to pair with Sidman's.

Linda Lipko says

This is by far one of the most beautifully illustrated books I've read. This book is based on the true story of young thirteen year old Maria Sibylla Merian, who, in the middle ages dispelled the belief that butterflies were of the devil.

The theory that butterflies grew deep in the mud and were scornful, evil objects was a very popular myth. Called the summer birds, the thought was that these beast of the devil grew up from the depths of the dark.

Watching them intensely, Maria captured the caterpillar, beetles and dragonflies and observed their cycles. Keeping them in jars, and feeding them leaves, she documented the stages of growth.

Taking a gigantic risk, Maria could have been deemed a witch for dabbling in something of Satan. As she studied the moths from cocoon to the chrysalis process, she watched as the incredibly beautiful butterflies grew and then drank nectar from flowers.

Carefully painting the images she observed, she documented and disproved the long-held theory.

I enjoy this book so much that I will purchase a copy for my library of illustrated books.

Cheryl says

Maria was a real live women, and after I read this book, I looked her up. Her botanical art was quite accomplished and beautiful, and I truly wish that some of it had been shown at the back of this book. Julia P's illustrations were stylized, but still reminiscent of Maria's more botanical style paintings, striking colors, and the book was very attractive.

I found the story to be oddly unsatisfying. I wanted more... more history, or more story about Maria's family. I didn't feel connected to the time period or the emotions of the girl. She looks like a peasant child, but she was a printer's daughter. I believe that would make her quite well-off. And I wondered who thought insects were devils or spawned from mud. Everyone? Or the masses?

KC says

Well told book about naturalist and artist Marie Merian.
