

Alec's Primer

Mildred Pitts Walter

Larry Johnson, Illustrator

The Vermont Folklife Center (Aug 25, 2008)

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A bloodstained primer and a jarful of pennies represent freedom in this story about the real-life Alec Turner, who was born a slave in Virginia in 1845. Based on the recollections of his daughter Daisy, young Alecs journey takes shape in the form of soldier-shaped cookies, a cruel mistress, and her kind granddaughter, Miss Zephie. Like many slave narratives written for adults, this inspiring tale locates the longing for freedom in cruel punishments, exemplary perseverance, and the importance of learning to read.

Five-year-old Alec is sentenced to labor under the hot plantation sun for biting the heads off a plateful of soldier cookies. After three years, the overseer rewards his diligence by sending him to work in the milk house, where he fills bottles and makes deliveries. He saves the pennies he receives as tips in a jar that he keeps hidden in his cabin.

Alec is reluctant when Miss Zephie announces her intention to teach him to read. His mother reminds him, “they put you in the field for eating cookies,” and insists that Miss Zephie is “trouble.” With refreshing honesty, the story refuses to idealize Miss Zephie, a privileged young woman used to having her own way, and instead focuses on Alecs awareness that she might not be entirely trustworthy. The connection between literacy and freedom is irresistible, however, and Alec allows his thirst for knowledge to conquer his fears.

Alecs Primer is one of several texts about the Turner family produced by the Vermont Folklife Center. *Daisy and the Doll* recounts a story from Daisy Turners childhood in rural Vermont. The cassette, *Journeys End: The Memories and Traditions of Daisy Turner and Her Family*, won the Peabody Award for Documentary Radio Programming in 1990.

The author, a renowned writer, scholar, and Coretta Scott King Award winner (for *Justin and the Best Biscuits in the World*) tells Alecs story in clear, understated prose that complements the illustrators evocative artwork. Johnson has exhibited his paintings in galleries around the country and illustrated several books, including *Daisy and the Doll* and *If You Traveled on the Underground Railroad*. His Mistress Gouldin is a vision of evil as she squints and shouts, and Alec glowers his responses more realistically than any words could render. The result is an expressive book to which children will respond on many levels.

ELIZABETH BREAU (August 18, 2009)

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