

PS 39 Diversity and Inclusion Book of the Month: February

Theme: Black History

Book Title: Tiny Stitches: The Life of Medical Pioneer Vivien Thomas
By Gwendolyn Hooks

Grade Level: 4th / 5th

Book Summary:

Vivien Thomas's greatest dream was to attend college to study medicine. But after the stock market crashed in 1929, Vivien lost all his savings. Then he heard about a job opening at the Vanderbilt University medical school under the supervision of Dr. Alfred Blalock. Vivien knew that the all-white school would never admit him as a student, but he hoped working there meant he was getting closer to his dream.

As Dr. Blalock's research assistant, Vivien learned surgical techniques. In 1943, Vivien was asked to help Dr. Helen Taussig find a cure for children with a specific heart defect. After months of experimenting, Vivien developed a procedure that was used for the first successful open-heart surgery on a child. Afterward, Dr. Blalock and Dr. Taussig announced their innovative new surgical technique, the Blalock-Taussig shunt. Vivien's name did not appear in the report.

Overcoming racism and resistance from his colleagues, Vivien ushered in a new era of medicine children's heart surgery. Tiny Stitches is the compelling story of this incredible pioneer in medicine.

Discussion Questions:

- How is the stock market crash of 1929 a turning point in Vivien's life?
- Why would schools, such as Vanderbilt University and John Hopkins University, not admit Vivien as a student? What was life like for African Americans during this time period?
- What can you infer about Vivien's character from his reaction to preparing an animal for shock treatment?
- How does Dr. Blalock treat Vivien Thomas? Does Dr. Blalock respect Vivien? Why or why not?
- Describe Dr. Blalock and Vivien Thomas's relationship. How do they support and learn from each other? How does their mentor-mentee relationship change throughout the story?
- How does being a person of color affect Vivien's career? What obstacles does Vivien face because of the color of his skin?
- What message does Vivien's job title as "janitor" send about Vanderbilt University's view of African Americans in academic roles?
- How do other doctors at Vanderbilt feel about Vivien's research technician job? Why do they not want Vivien working independently?
- Compare and contrast segregation in Nashville, Tennessee, to Baltimore, Maryland, during the 1930s and 1940s. How are people of color treated? What is similar? What is different?
- How does Vivien use his surgical skills to break racial barriers? How does the hospital and operating room serve as an equalizer between Vivien and his white colleagues?
- How does Vivien overcome the barriers and challenges he experiences? How does his perseverance and skill help him combat prejudice and segregation?

- Do you think Dr. Blalock is confident in his ability to perform the new surgical procedure? Do you think Dr. Blalock could have successfully completed the surgery without Vivien Thomas's guidance? Why or why not?
- How do you think racial discrimination affected the blue babies eligible for the Blalock-Taussig shunt procedure during the time period of the story?
- How do you think Vivien Thomas feels when Dr. Blalock and Dr. Taussig name the surgical procedure the Blalock-Taussig shunt? Why?
- Why doesn't Vivien Thomas receive recognition in any of the national magazines? Do you think this is fair? Why or why not? Do you think Vivien would have received recognition and praise if he were white or college educated? Why or why not?
- How do you think Vivien feels when he is finally publicly acknowledged for his research and surgical talents? Does he feel validated? Why or why not?
- Although Vivien never attended medical school, do you think he feels like he achieved his dream? Why or why not?
- What message does the placement of Vivien Thomas's portrait across from Dr. Blalock's at John Hopkins Hospital send to viewers? Why is this significant? How does John Hopkins Hospital view Vivien's accomplishments?
- Do you think Dr. Blalock would approve of the recognition Vivien Thomas receives, including the honorary doctorate degree and faculty appointment from Johns Hopkins University? Why or why not?
- Do you think Dr. Blalock is a good person? Why or why not?
- Read the afterword about Vivien Thomas and examine the photograph included in the back of the book. How is Vivien Thomas a medical pioneer and a trailblazer for African Americans and people of color in medicine, health, and other science careers? How might Vivien have influenced and inspired others to achieve their potential?
- How has the Blalock-Taussig shunt helped make significant medical advances in the world today?
- What message does this story say about the power of persistence to pursue your dreams?
- What is persistence? Share a time that you demonstrated persistence and worked hard to achieve a goal. What was your goal? Who helped you achieve your goal? What challenges did you face? What advice would you give someone who has a goal he or she wants to achieve?
- What do you know about prejudice, racism, and segregation? How do these issues affect and isolate groups of people? How do they rely on assumptions and preconceptions? Do you think racism is an issue today? Why or why not?

Full Lesson Guide can be found here:

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