

Major Taylor finds young audience

By Pamela H. Sacks
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James Ransome first heard the name Major Taylor when he happened to catch a brief televised profile of the cyclist during the 2000 summer Olympics in Atlanta.

Mr. Ransome, a professional illustrator and painter, was intrigued. He suspected that the story of Taylor, an African-American who fought prejudice to become the world champion cyclist in 1899, would make an inspiring and instructive children's book.

Mr. Ransome turned to his wife, Lesa Cline-Ransome, a writer. The two had collaborated on three other children's books, including one about the life of baseball pitcher Satchel Paige.

"Lesa did some research, and she was also fascinated by this man, who was not heard of outside the cycling world," Mr. Ransome said by telephone from his home in Rhinebeck, N.Y.

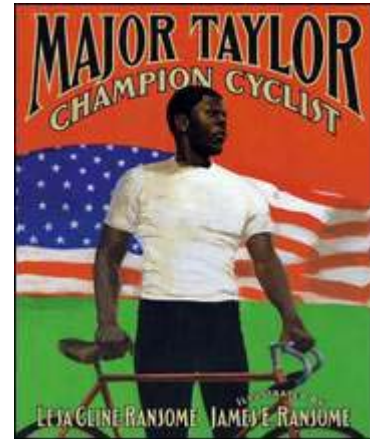
The author-illustrator team pored over Taylor's 1929 autobiography, "The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World," and Andrew Ritchie's "Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer." They read every newspaper and magazine article they could find about Taylor, who, while still a teenager, moved from Indianapolis to Worcester at the invitation of his trainer, Louis "Birdie" Munger.

Ms. Cline-Ransome worked on the text for a year. Mr. Ransome spent another year producing the vibrant paintings that chronicle Taylor's cycling years up through his victory in Paris over French champion Edmund Jacquelin. Their book, "Major Taylor, Champion Cyclist" was published earlier this year by Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

In recent years, Major Taylor has gained renown in Central Massachusetts, thanks to the efforts of the nonprofit Major Taylor Association, which is headquartered in Worcester and is raising money to erect a statue of the athlete. Pupils and staff in the Worcester public schools have enthusiastically joined in the fund-raising effort.

Virginia Walsh, a third-grade teacher at the West Tatnuck Elementary School, has created a Major Taylor curriculum that is taught to third- and fourth-graders throughout February, which is Black History Month. Additionally, the school department has ordered 100 copies of "Major Taylor Champion Cyclist" from the association, which benefits from the purchases of the book made through its Web site, www.majortaylorassociation.org.

"Part of our curriculum in third and fourth grades is to learn about people in Worcester who were important," Ms. Walsh said. "Major Taylor also fit with our character education theme, particularly in sportsmanship."



The book on Major Taylor is the second in trilogy on black athletes by James Ransome and Lesa Cline-Ransome.

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Book signing and drawing demonstration by the authors of 'Major Taylor, Champion Cyclist'

Where: Saxe Room, Worcester Public Library, 3 Salem Square, Worcester

When: 1:30, 3:30 and 7 p.m. today

How much: Free

This afternoon, 68 third- and fourth-grade pupils from the West Tatnuck Elementary School will be on hand to greet the Ransomes in the Saxe Room of the Worcester Public Library, 3 Salem Square, where the author and illustrator will sign copies of their book. Mr. Ransome also will give drawing demonstrations.

The first question a child - or an adult, for that matter - might ask is, How did a boy by the name of Marshall Taylor come to be called "Major?"

A youngster with a talent for trick riding, Taylor would perform each afternoon while clad in a bright red uniform with elaborate gold braiding outside a bicycle shop in Indianapolis where he worked. Crowds would gather to watch his stunts, and, according to Ms. Cline-Ransome, they would marvel, "He looks like a little major."

It was the shop's owners who urged Major Taylor to race. He won his first contest at the age of 13 and soon became a protege of Munger's. Taylor went on to become a superstar known as "The Worcester Whirlwind," holding seven world records in 1898, all while enduring his white opponents' racial epithets and dirty tactics.

Ms. Walsh remembered reading that Taylor was once knocked off his bike and choked unconscious. He makes so good a role model, she said, because he was never cited for unsportsmanlike behavior, despite his treatment at the hands of others. Asked by reporters how he managed to keep calm, Taylor would respond, "I simply ride away."

The Ransomes' book ends in a triumphant moment for Taylor, but the last years of his life were hardly uplifting, as they explain in a sort of epilogue. Taylor retired in 1909 at the age of 30. Over the next several years, he suffered business reverses and eventually ended up living at the YMCA in Chicago, while trying to sell copies of his autobiography. He died at 53, alone and destitute. He was buried in a pauper's grave.

In 1948, a group of former bicycle racers had Taylor's body exhumed and reburied with a headstone that reads: "World's champion bicycle rider who came up the hard way without hatred in his heart, an honest, courageous, and god-fearing, clean-living, gentlemanly athlete."

Mr. Ransome's illustrations are bold and colorful. His depiction of Taylor is amazingly lifelike when compared to a photograph of the champion in his heyday. To capture the look and feel of Taylor, he studied every picture he could find. Then he got lucky and happened to notice that a young man whose child attended the same elementary school as his children looked remarkably like Taylor. "He basically modeled for me," Mr. Ransome said.

Yet the artist, who is 42, said that he faced a challenge in trying to add freshness to a 19th-century story. It helped that he had for the last few years made an effort to create a more contemporary look to his work.

"Hopefully, kids will be more interested in the story because of the fresh look to the artwork," said Mr. Ransome, who is the father of four children between the ages of 3 and 10.

"Major Taylor" is the second in a trilogy of children's books on great African-American athletes that the Ransomes are producing. The first was the Satchel Paige book and the last will be about Pele, the great Brazilian soccer player.

Major Taylor is different, Mr. Ransome said, in that he was famous in his day but has largely been lost to history.

"It's a wonderful position to be in to introduce someone like Major Taylor to a young audience," he said.

Mr. Ransome also is creating a Major Taylor poster that will be sold to raise money for the athlete's statue.