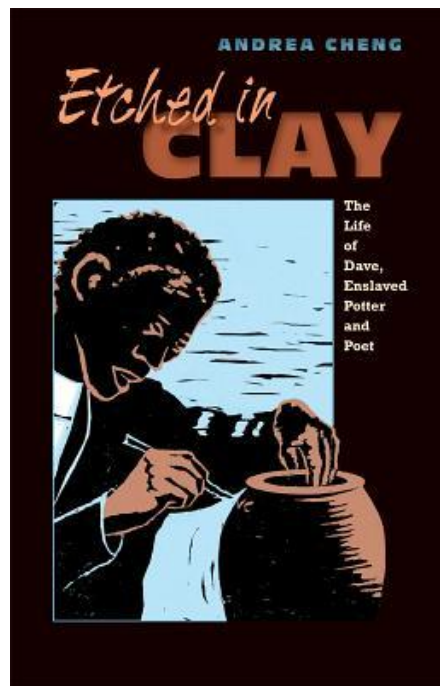




Etched in Clay: The Life of Dave, Enslaved Potter and Poet

Andrea Cheng (Illustrations)

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Etched in Clay: The Life of Dave, Enslaved Potter and Poet Andrea Cheng (Illustrations)

Sometime around 1815, an enslaved young man named Dave was brought to Edgefield, South Carolina, the center of a pottery-producing area known for the alkaline glazes used on the stoneware. Dave was taught how to turn pots and jars on a pottery wheel by one of his first owners. As Dave's talent flourished, he created pieces of great beauty and often massive size. He also somehow learned to read and write, in spite of South Carolina's strongly-held fear of slave literacy. And then Dave did something even more incredible--he began to sign his jars and carve many of them with sayings and poems that reflected his daily life and experiences. He spoke out against slavery not by protesting or revolting, but by daring to write at all. Andrea Cheng has crafted a biography in verse as beautiful as one of Dave's jars. In simple, powerful words, including some of Dave's original writings, we learn his extraordinary story of courage, creative inspiration, and triumph.

Etched in Clay: The Life of Dave, Enslaved Potter and Poet Details

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From Reader Review Etched in Clay: The Life of Dave, Enslaved Potter and Poet for online ebook

Rachael says

We know comparatively little about the life of Dave, the enslaved potter. We know roughly when he was born (around 1801), when he died (around 1870), and where he lived (South Carolina). We know that he lost a leg when he was about 35 years old, and that he was a skilled potter whose works were (and are still) prized by collectors. Most notably, we know that he could read and write, because he carved his name and some short poems into the clay of his own pots.

In a series of dramatic monologues, Andrea Cheng fleshes out these sparse details and shapes them into a poignant glimpse into the world of this remarkable artisan and poet. Writing from multiple perspectives, she gives the reader a panoramic view of the social and political realities that circumscribed the life of an enslaved man in 19th century South Carolina. In understated verse, she recreates the key moments of Dave's life, including enough sensory imagery to anchor the story without bogging it down in detail. Woodcut illustrations, also by Cheng, mesh well with the plainspoken text.

Overall, Etched in Clay is an effective and engaging verse biography. It is worth noting that Cheng takes a completely different approach than Laban Carrick Hill and Bryan Collier did in their 2011 Coretta Scott King Honor Book, *Dave the Potter*. Where Hill and Collier focused narrowly on Dave's work as a potter, Cheng attempts to paint a much broader portrait of the man and his times. It's an ambitious tactic, and one that leads to some pitfalls.

My biggest issue with multiple-perspective verse novels is how damnably hard it can be to distinguish among the speakers, and Etched in Clay is no exception. Without contextual clues, I think I would be hard-pressed to tell the difference between Dave and any of the other characters. Part of the problem is Cheng's decision to standardize the language for modern readers. It works well in practical terms, but since everyone is speaking modern American English, they all end up sounding the same. That creates a jarring contrast with the snippets she includes of Dave's own rough, lyrical poetry.

My other issue is with the inclusion of historical background. It's very difficult to throw in details about law and social norms within the confines of a dramatic monologue, without turning it into an instance of *As You Know, Bob*. That leads to clunkers like the following: "Just be forewarned / while allowing our slaves / to read is our duty / teaching them to write / is punishable / by South Carolina law."

These are relatively minor quibbles, but they will probably keep Etched in Clay from attaining the status of "most distinguished" for me. I will surprised, however, if we don't see this one on the Notables list at the very least.

Barbara says

A perfect pairing with *Dave the Potter*, the picture book by Laban Carrick Hill and Bryan Collier, this novel in verse is riveting and heart-wrenching. The man who became known as Dave the Potter, later took the name David Drake for his own, and spent most of his life as a slave in South Carolina. When his first master, Harvey Drake, realizes that Dave has an affinity for the potter's wheel on which he shapes beautiful, enormous jars and other vessels, he puts him to work there. Dave's talent outstrips that of those around him, and he watches in dismay as others take credit for his work, "forgetting it was me / who rolled the clay / for

the handles / thick and solid. / See the thumbprints / on the sides? / Those are from my hands" (p. 30). Because she wants him to learn to read the Bible, Sarah Drake, his master's wife, insists that he be taught to read. Dave is a fast learner, and quickly graduates from letters and one- and two-syllable words "to the long words / that I love best: / mag-nan-i-mous, / sa-gac-i-ty, / se-ver-i-ty" (p. 37). Even while Dave is pouring his heart out in his pottery, he is enduring great losses. His wife, Eliza, is sold to another plantation far away, and he begins composing verses in his head: "All day long / I'm turning pots and jars / on the potter's wheel / while my words and verses / swirl in my head. / But what's a verse / if it can't be read?// Someday / I'll write down verses of my own / and sign my name: / Dave" (p. 52). As small slave revolts horrify the South's politicians and political leaders, South Carolina passes laws that forbid slave literacy. Dave has begun recording some of his writing on the pots he creates, and he reflects, "Someday the world will read / my word etched in clay / on the side of this jar / and know about the shackles / around our legs / and the whips / upon our backs. / I am not afraid / to write on a jar / and fire it hot / so my word / can never be erased" (p. 63-64). When his second wife and her two children are sold and move to Louisiana, again, Dave is left alone without even the comfort of written words to sustain him due to the state's antiliteracy laws. The words he ponders while not being able to write them down struck a powerful chord within me as he thinks, "In my head, / I cannot stop the words from flowing: / lamentable, / philanthropic, / disenfranchised, / vulnerable. / But I don't write them down, / and the words float away / like twigs in a stream, / stuck on a rock / for a moment / and then gone" (p. 95). As I read many of the words Dave collected, words like these four, I thought how perfectly he chose words to fit his situation and how brave he was to continue to write, even if only in his head. Years later, in the possession of another master, as he fashions another jar, "Then the words / start flowing in my head. / Once again / I pick up a writing stick. / Can I remember / how to form a J? / The clay is waiting, / and the memory is in my hands: / Just a mammoth Jar... / is all I write. / For now / that is enough" (p. 107). Since the author has included some of the words and poems that Dave wrote, the story has poignancy and immediacy and shows the determination of this man to be heard and to be remembered. While heart-breaking, his story, told in alternating points of view, is a vivid example of one man's ability to endure and to leave his mark. Readers will not soon forget Dave.

Jill says

Etched in Clay: The Life of Dave, Enslaved Potter and Poet by Andrea Cheng is for older readers (Publisher Lee & Low suggests grade 5 and up). In this book, the author imagines Dave's personal history in verse form, occasionally illustrated by handmade woodcuts also by the author.

I found the story as told by this author absolutely devastating, although I don't know if younger readers would feel, as strongly as I did, the pain of the injustice and loss suffered by Dave. There is this etching, for example, from one of Dave's pots:

I wonder where is all my relation
friendship to all – and, every nation"
August 16, 1857

In fact, however, I imagine that most readers will take away an appreciation of Dave's triumph over adversity through his courageous insistence on showing the world that, although a slave, he could create, and he could write, and he could be so good at it that he could get away with it.

Chris Holliman says

The Story (in 5 sentences or less): Dave is a slave purchased by Harvey Drake in Augusta, Georgia in 1815. Harvey takes him to Pottersville, South Carolina and not only teaches him pottery, but also how to read. Over the span of years, Dave suffers greatly as his loved ones (including two wives) are sold away. Dave begins carving words and poems into some of his pottery, a small act of sedition and outlet for his grief.

My Take: I wondered if this book would be able to measure up to the quality of the Caldecott Honor book "Dave the Potter;" I believe that it does. Written in short chapters of verse in 1st person, the poetry is never intrusive or self conscious, but rather breathes real life into the characters. The poems are lean and spare, but sketch out the characters enough so that we grieve at the tragedies in Dave's life. I'd recommend this book to readers ages 11+ who are interested in knowing what being a slave feels like. An appendix explains the life and times of Dave from an historical perspective.

Shannon says

Wonderful story about a slave named Dave who was taught how to create pottery and read and write. There is also a picture book about Dave the Potter!

Amy Rae says

This is one of those books you feel terrible about giving a mediocre rating, but it sort of begs for one.

The subject matter--the potter Dave, who was born a slave, died a free man, and wrote Burma Shave-esque poetry on his beautifully made pottery in between--is fascinating, as well as a subject I wasn't familiar with before this book came out. His life is absolutely inspiring and worthy of receiving greater recognition.

But Cheng's poetry feels less like poetry and more like paragraphs that someone hit the Enter key on every few words. The broad cast of characters is difficult to differentiate (and worse, the ebook opens at the first poem, skipping the *dramatis personae*!), because they all have very similar diction, and the story doesn't feel nearly as immediate as it should. A few poems get their points across, like the one in which (view spoiler), but many feel like rote explanations of events.

If anything, the nonfiction prose explanations at the back were much more engaging. I wonder if a short nonfiction book, like Walter Dean Myers' *At Her Majesty's Request: An African Princess in Victorian England*, would have been a better way of presenting the subject.

Additionally, while the woodblock illustrations are beautiful and evocative, the cover is ugly and dated, and I can't see it drawing readers in. It seriously looks like a textbook from the 1980s to me.

I think this book could read aloud as monologues by students, and that could potentially be interesting and enjoyable. But it's not one of the better novels in verse I've read, and I was really disappointed in the execution of an idea that, in theory, is so worthy.

Alex (not a dude) Baugh says

A few years ago, we met Dave in Labab Carrick Hill's wonderful picture book *Dave the Potter: Artist, Poet, Slave*, illustrated by Bryan Collier. This year, we meet Dave again in Andrea Cheng's new verse novel for middle graders.

In *Etched in Clay*, Cheng imagines Dave's life from the day he was bought for \$500. at auction as a strong, intelligent young man approximately 17 years old. He was bought in 1815 by Harvey Drake as a slave to help dig up clay for the Potterville Stoneware Manufactory, a business founded by relatives Abner and Amos Landrum. Drake, now a partner in the business, gives the new slave the name Dave.

One day, while watching Master Drake turning a pot, Dave is asked if he would like to learn how to do it. Dave turns out to be a quick learner and an imaginative artisan, displaying more talent than most in throwing, shaping and glazing good looking saleable clay pots and jars. And he enjoys creating different kinds in various sizes for different uses.

One day, Drake's wife Sarah, a religious woman, tells her husband to give Dave a spelling book to help in learn to read, so he may read the Scriptures and be saved. Defying the law against it, Dave does learn to read as well as write and soon he is etching his name on the pots and jars he creates. Later, he begins to write short verses on them. Even when he is told to stop do this, Dave defies the order and continues to express himself.

Dave's own life isn't quite as satisfying as his life as a potter. Because he is property, he has no freedom. He is bought and sold several times to various members of the Drake and Landrum family. His first wife Eliza is sold despite his begging to spare her. His second wife is taken away to live elsewhere, and even the young stepsons he has grown to love are sold. And one night, Dave got so drunk, he laid on the railroad tracks to rest and lost a leg when the train ran over it, saving him from being moved to Louisiana, but making other things more difficult to do.

Etched in Clay is the story of Dave's life as Cheng imagined it to be like based on what little known facts there are about this gifted potter and his exquisite pottery, often using the very words Dave etched in clay to piece it together. It is written in a series of spare free verse poems from the perspective of not only Dave but of every important person in his life, creating not just Dave's biography but giving the reader a more rounded sense of what his life really might have been like:

Someday the world will read
my word etched in clay
on the side of this jar
and know about the shackles
around out legs
and the whips
upon our backs.
I am not afraid
to write on a jar
and fire it hot
so my word.
can never be erased (pg 63-64)

Not only did Cheng write the poems in *Etched in Clay*, but she has also created brilliant woodcuts to illustrate them. The simple black and white woodcuts, a common form of graphic illustration in the 19th century, have a rather primitive folk art feel to them reflecting the crude conditions in which the slaves were forced to live.

Cheng has included a map of South Carolina showing places relevant to Dave's life and a short who's who of the different narrators used in the book as well as an afterward, history of Edgefield Pottery (one of the places Dave made pots and jars), some of Dave's poems and a list of sources used.

Etched in Clay is an unforgettable, inspiring story of a quiet rebel and artisan that is not to be missed.

This book is recommended for readers age 10+

This book was borrowed from the NYPL

This review was originally published at Randomly Reading

Daniel says

Yes!

I will admit to a small bias against poetry. Despite studying it, writing it, promoting it, I've always had a hard time getting excited about reading poetry. So when I flipped this open and saw it was in verse, there was a momentary pause, I put it down and came back to it later. And I'm very glad that I returned to this!

In free verse, this tells the story of the slave, known as "Dave," purchased in 1815. His owner, Harvey Drake, is a potter and he teaches Dave the art of pottery. Harvey also happens to violate the law, and teaches Dave to read and write as well. Dave becomes an expert potter, often marking his pots with bits of writing.

Despite the short, free verse poems, we manage to learn a lot about what it's like to be a slave (having wives sold and sent away; the dangers of knowing too much; etc) and about life in the 1800's and about pottery. It's quite remarkable how much I picked up in this brief volume targeted toward elementary school readers. The writing captures a mood and tone of the era quite well.

I finished the book, feeling richer for what I learned, but also wanting to know more about pottery at this time, slavery and the fight for freedom, and the region in which this clay was found and turned in to pottery. Wanting to learn more is always good (provided it's not because we didn't learn anything).

Looking for a good book? This is all-around a fantastic, quick read. Aimed at young readers, adults should feel enriched after reading it to their children.

This review originally published in the blog Looking For a Good Book.

Fumi Agboola says

POETRY: This poetry chapter book is great option for teaching 3rd-6th grade. I read this book online. The book tells the story of Dave, an enslaved man who lived in Edgefield, South Carolina. Dave was taught how to make pottery by his first owner, and starts creating pieces of art. In addition to learning how to make pottery, he learned how to read and write, so he started signing his pieces and writing poetry about his experiences. I would use this story in my classroom because it does two things: Illustrate the experience of a slave during the 19th century and it can be integrated with language arts. This is a great opportunity for student to learn about the major structural components of poems, and understand literary terms used, such as

imagery and symbolism. This is a WOW book because the content of the book can make for great discussion with students, particularly for 5th and 6th graders.

Joan says

I was wondering how a book with over a hundred pages could possibly contain the life of Dave the Potter when so little is known about him. The answer is that the book is in poetry with lots and lots of white on each page. I wish the book had been footnoted or had a more extensive author note explaining where many pieces of information came from. For example, the author makes it sound as though Dave loved his wives dearly. Is this a known fact or just a guess? How do we know he taught his stepsons how to read? I could go on and on. Another question I have is whether it is a fact that Dave was drunk when he lost his leg?

While I can see the appropriateness of using poetry to tell Dave's story, I am frustrated because it simply leaves too much information out. Why the mystery about Stony Bluff, mentioned on the map? I think Ms. Cheng chose a creative way to present Dave's story. I just don't think it was as successful as it could have been. As long as we are using poetry in ways not thought about before, why can't the poems be footnoted in prose to explain where a piece of info came from? If you are going to make poetry serve the purpose of nonfiction, then you have an obligation, like any nonfiction writer, to explain where and why your facts are correct. Or if they are facts. I'd have given this a lower grade but the poems and woodcuts do convey a feeling for the times and are valuable as fiction to give a taste of what the times were like. While the book has a bibliography and Dave's work are expressly identified as his, I do wish more had been done to make this successful nonfiction. This format has potential but it is going to have to make concessions to the demands of proper nonfiction if used this way.

Richie Partington says

Richie's Picks: ETCHED IN CLAY: THE LIFE OF DAVE, ENSLAVED POTTER AND POET by Andrea Cheng, Lee & Low, January 2013, 144p., ISBN: 978-1-60060-451-5

"As William Faulkner once wrote, 'The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past.' We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country. But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow."

-- Barack Obama, speech, "A More Perfect Union," March 18, 2008

"But they're not yours, they are my own
And I am never broken"
-- Jewel, "Hands"

Dave, 1826
"...I unbrick the door.
Little John hands me the jars
one by one,
warm and shining
in the rising sun.
Doctor Landrum says,
'See that green?'

Have you seen a color
shimmer like that?'
He holds my jar,
the big one with the lip
and glaze dripping
down the sides.
'Now, that's a jar,'
he says,
forgetting it was me
who dug the clay,
and centered the mound,
and pushed my weight
against the wheel,
forgetting it was me
who rolled the clay
for the handles
thick and solid.
See the thumbprints
on the sides?
Those are from my hands."

Dave was a slave. He was purchased at age seventeen for business purposes and was taught the trade of pottery -- everything from digging the clay to throwing and glazing and firing the pots he created for his white owners.

Dave was an artist, an extraordinary potter. And Dave, who learned to read and write, was also a poet who etched his short verses into the jars he crafted -- an extraordinarily dangerous thing for a slave to be doing, for it was against the law down there in South Carolina.

A number of books have now been written about Dave who, two hundred years ago, would have been twelve or so.

"...And if some day
this jar cracks,
my word will stay,
etched in the shards."

ETCHED IN CLAY is the story in verse of Dave's life in slavery (and just beyond). The book contains beautiful woodcut illustrations created by the author, and deep reddish-brown (clay colored) endpapers. It is a book that tells the very ugly story of what it was to be enslaved. Of having your wife sold away from you as if you were both livestock. Of longing and missing and one day marrying again. And then having that wife also sold away from you. Of being creative and innovative and successful, but having another reap the rewards of that creativity and innovation because somehow the white Christian folk of the day could perfect such amazing contortions of their minds and their hearts so as to see you as a depreciable business asset rather than a human being and artist.

And, finally, of being an old man freed from bondage. Of having the luxury -- like a human, rather than the family dog -- of possessing a surname:

David Drake, 1866

"Go on the road,

a one-legged old man,
like me?
No, my friend.
But I beg you,
please,
wherever you go,
look for my loved ones..."

Richie Partington, MLIS
Richie's Picks <http://richiespicks.com>
BudNotBuddy@aol.com
Moderator http://groups.yahoo.com/group/middle_...
<http://slisweb.sjsu.edu/people/facult...>

Kelsee Palmer says

Etched in Clay is a story written in poetry about a slave who was an amazing potter and poet himself. The poetry illustrates his life as a slave and the struggles he faced through many different story tellers including his two wives, his owners, and himself. I think this book is best taught to either 4th or 5th graders.

If I were to use this book in my classroom the most obvious way would be to introduce poetry. This book would help students realize that they can tell an amazing story with just a few words; you just have to choose the right ones. Another way that I could use this book is to focus on how Dave viewed writing. He always spoke about how he was filled with words and phrases, but he was forbidden to write them down. I think students will realize how powerful and important writing and words really are. This will hopefully encourage them to take advantage of the education they have. In the book each of the poems are written from a different character's perspective. I could ask students to write a few of their own poems that tell a story from their life. They could write one from the perspective of their parents or siblings or friends or any other loved ones.

This is a wow book for me because poetry has never really caught my attention. Sometimes I feel that it is hard to interpret. This book is easily interpreted. The story is clear but meaningful. I think students will love this just as much as any other novel. Another reason that I love this book is that it represents how incredible the ability to write really is. One of the poems from the perspective of Harvey Drake called "Our Conscience" ends with the line, "Indeed, writing is a weapon." I think that is so crucial to realize, especially as a young student.

Stephanie Tournas says

This is "a narrative biography, told in verse, with some imagined scenes, people, thoughts and dialogue." This is as close as we are likely to get to understanding the life of Dave, a slave bought and sold many times in 19th century South Carolina. Living through the sale of wives and stepchildren, through different masters, Dave nevertheless was highly valued for his pottery skills. We mainly know of him through the few words that are etched on his surviving pots, despite the fact that he risked maiming or death to have written them. Moving poetic prose fills in gaps as to what life may have been like for Dave, or for any of a number of skilled and enslaved crafts people from the time. Spare black and white woodcuts complement the spare but emotionally alive text. Includes sources.

Tasha says

Told in virtuoso verse, this is the true story of the life of Dave, an enslaved potter who lived in the years before and after Emancipation. Dave was an artist, most likely making over a thousand pieces of pottery in his lifetime of work of which only 170 survive today. He inscribed some of his pieces with either his own name, his master's name and also poetry that he wrote, brief verses that offer a glimpse into his world. The amount of bravery that small act took is monumental, since Dave faced potential death because he was demonstrating his ability to read and write in a time when it was forbidden for slaves in South Carolina to do so. Dave serves both as an example of the injustice and brutality of slavery and also as a remarkable example of the artistry and strength of human beings.

Cheng tells Dave's story in very short poems. They are not all in Dave's voice, sometimes instead being in the voice of his owners, his wife, or his children. Cheng does not soften the harshness of slavery, offering poems that speak directly to the separation of families through selling them apart and the brutality of the punishments inflicted. I would not call it unflinching, because one can sense Cheng flinching alongside the reader as she captures the moment but also makes it completely human and important.

Cheng also did the woodcuts that accompany the poetry. They are a harmonious combination with the subject matter thanks to their rough edges and hand-hewn feel. Done only in black and white, they share the same powerful message as the poems.

This powerful book informs middle grade readers about a man who could have been one of the many lost faces of slavery but who through art and bravery had a voice. Appropriate for ages 12-15.

Kbutler says

Wonderful subject, great writing but awful cover. I'm afraid not a single one of my middle school students will pick this up because of the cover. I know, I know, never judge a book by its cover but we all do especially middle schoolers.
