

# **GIFTED EDUCATION NEWS-PAGE**

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This issue is dedicated to individuals who have achieved giftedness despite discrimination as the result of racism, sexism and being disabled. The articles are book reviews and essays from previous issues of *Gifted Education News-Page* and *Gifted Education Press Quarterly*.

**Marie Curie: A Life (1995) by Susan Quinn. Simon & Schuster, New York.** The life of Marie Curie (1867-1934) demonstrates the intellectual development, determination and sheer scientific brilliance of the first woman to win a Nobel Prize. In 1903, she and her husband, Pierre, along with Henri Becquerel received this award for their joint research on radioactivity. There was much hostility among members of the Nobel committee against awarding this prize to a woman. Fortunately, sanity prevailed after they realized the quality of her independent work and genius in physics. Marie Curie's unique and pioneering contributions to the study of radioactive substances helped later physicists and chemists to unravel the inner structure of matter. She was born (the fifth and last child) near Warsaw, Poland to parents who were teachers. Her father was an avid student of science who conveyed his enthusiasm for the scientific method to Maria and her siblings. She grew up during a tumultuous period in Poland's history when university students and other citizens were rebelling against the Russian occupation. In 1891 at 23 years, she went to Paris to study science at the Sorbonne. Two years later Maria received her first science degree as the highest ranking graduate in her class. She obtained her doctorate in physics in 1903. While at the Sorbonne, she met and married Pierre Curie -- a young and promising physicist. Together, they helped create the field of atomic physics through their research on such elements as radium and polonium. "It had been she who first isolated radium; it was she who, in 1907, established its atomic weight. . . ." (Quinn, 1975, p. 276).

In 1906 a tragedy occurred when Pierre was run over and killed by a thirty-four-foot horse drawn wagon. Marie continued with her research in physics in addition to raising two daughters. She triumphed again in 1911 when she received a second Nobel Prize for her work in chemistry -- the identification of the radioactive elements, radium and polonium. This book covers both Curie's scientific-intellectual and personal lives. Reviewed by Maurice Fisher. Reviewed by Maurice Fisher. *Gifted Education News-Page June-July 1995.*

**Richard Rodriguez: Struggles of a Gifted Minority Student by Michael E. Walters New York City Public Schools.**

"Intimacy is not created by a particular language; it is created by intimates." (from **Hunger of Memory**, p. 32). In college courses throughout the United States, an autobiography by a Mexican American writer, Richard Rodriguez, is required reading. His book is used for provoking thinking and discussion on such intensive topics as multiculturalism, cultural hegemony, affirmative action and bilingualism. However, **Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez** (1982, Bantam Books), possesses special insights for those in the gifted education field. The concerns that gifted educators share with Rodriguez are twofold: First, he pointedly represents the dilemma of the gifted minority student. Secondly, his book is the result of giftedness as expressed by the psychological aspects of sensibility.

The term "minority student" is not a numerical status but a term concerned with political power. It is obvious that if one takes women, Latinos, and African, Asian and Native-Americans from a state such as California, this collective numerical mass represents a majority. Despite their numerical majority, they are perceived as in the minority compared to the power elite of California and the nation. Therefore, at least at the present time, "a minority student" is a cultural and political description. Richard Rodriguez, contrary to his own political perceptions, fell into this concept of "a minority student," especially as it is defined by federal bureaucracies. His book is a testament to one person's struggle for his own sense of self. He is perhaps in his own way seeking to become a self-actualized person according to Maslow's theory, and he demands the freedom to define himself on his own terms. Rodriguez desires most of all, the right to perceive himself based on sensibility rather than ethnicity.

Rodriguez's love for literature displayed itself during his early years. He read and wrote constantly -- Dante, Shakespeare and Dickens had a more compelling message than a specific political agenda. What is important is not that Rodriguez's views are politically incorrect, but that his views derive from the understanding of a gifted individual. For example, his interest in religion is a more relevant concern than his ethnicity. The French Catholic existential theologian, Jacques Maritain (1882-1973), and the Jewish existential philosopher, Martin Buber (1878-1965), are individuals who speak his language. *Gifted Education Press Quarterly Summer 1996.*

**Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story (1996) by Ben Carson with Cecil Murphey. Zondervan House Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI.** -- As a world renowned neurosurgeon, Ben Carson is known for his leadership in conducting difficult brain operations on children. His most notable accomplishment occurred when he led a team of 70 individuals in successfully completing the separation of seven months old babies joined at the head. This autobiography would be particularly inspiring for minority children because the author grew up in the black ghettos of Detroit and Boston. (Most of his public schooling occurred in Detroit.) Carson describes difficult years in elementary school until the school nurse identified his vision problems in the middle of the fifth grade. After being fitted with glasses, his performance in the upper elementary grades improved until he progressed to the top of his class in junior high and high school.

The major positive forces in his young life were his mother and older brother, Curtis, who later became an engineer. Mrs. Carson was

determined that her sons would perform well in public school, attend college and be successful in life. In addition, she instilled ethical principles in Ben and Curtis through her religious teachings and involvement in church activities. She organized their life outside of school so that study and reading took precedence over everything including television.

This combination of a strong-willed mother, religious education, and concerned teachers produced amazing results. Ben became a high academic performer in junior high and high school. He graduated near the top of his class and became colonel of the Detroit ROTC high school brigade. Yale University offered him a 90 percent academic scholarship where he successfully competed against some of the best pre-med students in the country. After finishing his undergraduate work at Yale, he was accepted at the University of Michigan Medical School. His interests turned to neurosurgery and upon completion of his four years of medical school, he went to Johns Hopkins University for his internship and five years of residency as a neurosurgeon. He is currently director of pediatric neurosurgery at the Johns Hopkins Hospital and has a worldwide reputation in this field. Teachers, students and counselors should read and use this book as an inspirational resource for study in the medical sciences. Besides providing details of the operation that separated the Siamese twins, the book contains the stories of many other surgical patients. Reviewed by Maurice Fisher. *Gifted Education News-Page June-July 1999.*

**Louis Armstrong, In His Own Words: Selected Writings of Louis Armstrong (1999) by Louis Armstrong, and Thomas Brothers, Editor. Oxford University Press, New York.** The editor has assembled many of Louis Armstrong's articles, letters and reminisces into a collection that describes his early life in New Orleans and his successful rise in the musical world. In his unique narrative, Armstrong combined the black dialect of his youth with a jazzy, fluid style of expression. He described his hard times growing up in New Orleans in the early 1900's which involved many experiences similar to scenes written by Charles Dickens. He attributed his early start in music to the Karnofsky family of New Orleans whom he worked for as a youth. Armstrong says of this family: "The Karnofsky Family kept reminding me that I had Talent -- perfect Tonation when I would Sing. One day when I was on a wagon with Morris Karnofsky -- we were on Rampart and Perdido Streets and we passed a Pawn Shop which had in it's Window -- an old tarnished beat up "B" Flat Cornet. It cost Five Dollars. Morris advanced me Two Dollars on my Salary. Then I put aside Fifty Cents each week from my small pay -- finally the Cornet was Paid for in full. Boy was I a happy Kid." (p. 15). Although this book is particularly useful to scholars of the history of jazz, it is very informative for gifted students who want to learn more about the development and personality of an originator of jazz trumpet playing and singing. Reviewed by Maurice Fisher. *Gifted Education News-Page April-May 2000.*

**Privileged Hands: A Scientific Life (1997) by Geerat Vermeij. W. H. Freeman, New York.** Vermeij is a world renowned evolutionary biologist and expert on seashells. He discusses his personal and intellectual development while a young child in his native country, the Netherlands, and during his life in the United States. This is an astonishing story because he is completely blind as a result of suffering from childhood glaucoma. In 1950, when he was four years old, both eyes were removed by Dutch surgeons to prevent his brain from being damaged by this disease. The didactic value of **Privileged Hands** is that it tells about a family and teachers who would not accept Vermeij's disability as an impediment to his social and intellectual development. From an early age, he was interested in collecting and classifying seashells -- his parents, brother and teachers strongly supported this activity. But his biggest boost came in 1956 when he was enrolled in the Newton, New Jersey Public Schools where his fourth grade teacher let him explore a collection of shells from Florida's west coast. (The New Jersey Commission for the Blind and the Newton Public Schools deserve high praise for allowing this child to fully participate in the regular school program.) By using his sense of touch, Vermeij could distinguish between the texture and surface characteristics of these shells and the ones he and his family collected on the beaches of the Netherlands. Two years later in 1958 he expanded his collecting interests to pressed leaves and human artifacts such as cigar wrappers. Although his high school academic program was not stimulating, the Saturday Science Honors Program (beginning in 1963) at Columbia University supported his interests in natural history and the study of evolution. Following his graduation from high school (1965), he attended Princeton University where he studied with authorities on evolutionary biology and marine life. They were astounded by Vermeij's ability to identify the species that inhabited different seashells. After completing his undergraduate work at Princeton, Vermeij pursued doctoral studies at Yale University where he obtained a Ph.D. in biology with a minor in geology. In 1971 he was employed as an assistant professor at the University of Maryland to teach courses in marine biology. From this position he built up a reputation as an expert in marine biology and ecology based upon his research and teaching. Subsequently, he moved to the University of California, Davis in 1988 where he is currently a professor of biology and paleontology. This remarkable individual has some important lessons to teach educators of the gifted. First, he stresses that independent learning should be at the core of all science education. ("I inherited from my Yale advisors the belief that independence of mind lies at the core of a successful scientific career." p. 245) Second, he abhors special preferences for disabled individuals in academic employment. There are several sections of this book where he emphasizes the point that such preferences are harmful to both the disabled and non-disabled. This great scientist has traveled a heroic path in the development of his life and career. **Privileged Hands** is an inspirational autobiography that can help gifted students to understand how determination and intense curiosity can surmount even the most serious disabilities. Reviewed by Maurice Fisher. *Gifted Education News-Page February-March 1998.*