



# Tiny Stitches: The Life of Medical Pioneer Vivien Thomas

*Gwendolyn Hooks , Colin Bootman (Illustrator)*

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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.

## Tiny Stitches: The Life of Medical Pioneer Vivien Thomas Details

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## **From Reader Review Tiny Stitches: The Life of Medical Pioneer Vivien Thomas for online ebook**

### **Earl says**

This was recommended to me by a librarian after I told her I was proclaiming 2017 as the year of nonfiction picture books. I was intrigued when she had mentioned being impressed by this even though I had no idea what she was referring to with the term "blue babies."

It was amazing how much Vivien Thomas persevered- and not just because of racism. It's still unbelievable how mistreated people were (are) treated because of the color of their skin. I'm just glad that he got recognized for his incredible life-saving achievements.

A stand-out feature was the backmatter which included a glossary of medical terms, information about tetralogy of Fallot (the scientific name of the "blue babies" condition, as well as more information about Vivien Thomas with a focus on the people whose career trajectories he helped shape. I was curious if they were part of the Old Hands Club who helped spotlight him and his contribution to the medical field in the first place.

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### **Kim Ventrella says**

Tiny Stitches tells the story of medical pioneer Vivien Thomas, an African American who overcame discrimination in the 1940's to develop a life-saving surgical procedure. Hooks takes readers from his early days working in his father's carpentry shop, through the Great Depression and on to Vanderbilt University, where he applies his carpentry skills to surgery while working with Dr. Alfred Blalock. Vivien loves his job, until he learns that he is classified as a janitor, not a research technician like all of his white counterparts. Vivien overcomes this setback, and many others, to pioneer a surgical procedure to save babies born with tetralogy of fallot, a deadly heart defect.

Hooks has crafted an engaging story of scientific discovery and perseverance, and Bootman's evocative watercolors add poignancy to this heartfelt tale. Young readers will be drawn in by moments of rising tension, as Vivien confronts and overcomes discrimination. Readers will also get insight into how scientific discovery works, from the idea, to experimentation and finally to practice. Tiny Stitches is an important book about a forgotten hero that deserves space in all public and school libraries, and would make a great addition to any STEM curriculum.

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### **Danielle says**

I'm so glad Gwendolyn Hooks wrote this book. We should all celebrate the pioneering work of Vivien Thomas.

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## **Tegan says**

This is amazing. I am so happy I got to learn about Vivien. He had an amazing career and I'm sorry that he was not recognized for it sooner. I am glad he was acknowledged and he was able to impact so many great careers. We are very lucky to have had him! Read for Info Books for Youth for grad school.

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## **Amber Martin says**

As a "blue baby" myself who has had a Blalock shunt, I was very excited to see a new book about Vivien Thomas. I am so grateful that he had the opportunities that he did and the friendship he had with Alfred Blalock. Thomas has become sort of a hero for me because, without him, I might not have had the opportunities that I've had. (Prognosis for babies with Tetralogy of Fallot without corrective surgery is 21 years old at best.)

This story gives a very real look at the life of a black man in the 30s and 40s. Issues such as racism, segregation, and unfair wages are addressed. I found that the only issue with the book was that the vocabulary was on a higher level. If I were to read it to my 4 year old he would not understand the most of it (especially the themes of racism). If I were to read it to my 8 year old I believe she would understand most of it, however the medical jargon might be difficult. Overall a wonderful book for both the subjects of racism and the history of medicine, if you are interested in either.

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## **Marfita says**

Vivien Thomas dreams of college and medical school and fortunately there are some for black students in Nashville, but the stock market crash of 1929 eliminates his savings. When a job opens at Vanderbilt's medical school lab, Thomas applies. He impresses Dr. Blalock and eventually conducts experiments and writes up reports. Another doctor loans him medical textbooks. He learns to suture and make the tiny stitches of the title. Then he discovers his job title is *janitor* and he then insists he should be paid the same as other technicians doing the same job.

When Blalock moves to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, Thomas goes with him - and finds it more segregated even than Vanderbilt. [This is not surprising after learning what Boston was like during integration.]

Thomas made needles small enough to be used on infants in order to solve Dr. Taussig's "blue babies" problem. He experimented on animals with a technique he and Blalock developed to attach arteries. When a blue baby with no hope of survival without an operation turns up, Thomas, at Blalock's insistence, guides Blalock through the operation he developed that saves the child's life. Blalock and Taussig wrote up the procedure and were hailed in the press and nominated for a Nobel Prize - but no mention was made of Thomas despite his continuing to help Blalock through the operations that were becoming commonplace. It was over 20 years later before Thomas was recognized for his efforts - with an honorary doctorate from Johns Hopkins and a faculty appointment in Surgery.

Yet another lesson in "It's a White Man's World."

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### **Joanne Roberts says**

Excellent presentation. Needed. Book highlights a pioneer overlooked because of his skin color. Shines a light on MC's selflessness and character as well as his achievements. Gives a positive role model for reacting against oppression. Ends on a positive note, the acclaim and recognition he finally received. Illustrations are attractive, but often static.

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### **Kate says**

Interesting story to tell, but the illustrations didn't appeal to me and the writing felt a little flat.

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### **Valerie Lawson says**

I thoroughly enjoyed reading about this talented and humble man who deserved to have his story told. The beautiful illustrations enhance the wonderful storytelling. Well done!

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### **Debbie Tanner says**

A lovely picture book biography about Vivien Thomas, a man determined to become a doctor, even when it was difficult to do so. He pioneered open heart surgeries on infants and yet remained unrecognized until the 1970s.

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### **Sandra Byrd Lawson says**

What a great book with so much information on a subject/person I'd never heard of. It really shows the racial barriers that have been overcome in our society. Every school child should read this book! Loved it!

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### **Alex (not a dude) Baugh says**

Tiny Stitches is an excellent picture book for older readers about this fascinating life-saving pioneer in heart surgery.

When Vivien Thomas was a young boy, his dream was to enter the medical field. As a teen, Vivien helped his father, a master carpenter in Nashville, Tennessee, who taught him the value of patient measuring, cutting and fitting together pieces of wood, skills that would definitely be valuable to Vivien later on.

Vivien saved his money for medical school, but by the time he was ready to go, the stock market had crashed and he lost all his savings. Luckily, he was able to get a job as a lab assistant working in Dr. Alfred Blalock's Vanderbilt University laboratory.

Thanks to Dr. Blalock, Vivien learned how to write lab reports and conduct experiments with the same kind of meticulous care he had used while working for his father, so it wasn't long before he was doing his own experiments. But when he learned that his official job title was janitor because he was African American, he was insulted. He confronted Dr. Blalock, asking for and receiving the same paid as white technicians.

When Dr. Blalock moved to Johns Hopkins in Maryland, Vivien and his wife and two daughters went with him. Maryland is a southern state, and Johns Hopkins was more segregated than Vanderbilt was, so Vivien faced a more strident racism than he was used to.

But it was there that Vivien got involved in the research Dr. Helen Taussig's research on "blue babies," patients born with a heart defect that made their skin appear bluish because they did not get enough oxygen and usually died.

Thanks to his patient and meticulous research and experiments, Vivien was able to develop a procedure for delivering blood directly to the lungs to provide oxygen to a baby's body, using the tiny needle Vivien invented to make the tiny stitches needed to suture the arteries involved.

Was Vivien's procedure a success? Yes, it was, with articles about it in Time and Life magazines, and eventually a Nobel Prize nomination. Was Vivien given credit along with Dr. Blalock and Dr. Taussig? No, not until 26 years after the first successful blue baby surgery.

It remained up to the doctors he has subsequently trained in his procedure to do that in 1971, and finally, in 1976, Johns Hopkins awarded Vivien an honorary doctorate and appointed him to the faculty as Instructor of Surgery (with the appropriate salary, hopefully).

I thought that Gwendolyn Hooks presented the obstacles Vivien Thomas faced because of his race with clarity and dignity. I have to admit I was disappointed that there was no indication (and I'm sure that is because it didn't happen) that the two doctors Vivien had worked so closely with and whose life saving surgery was successful because of his experiments never insisted that he also be given credit.

I found this to be an excellent and inspiring story. Colin Bootman's soft, realistic watercolor illustrations add depth and respect to a man who had to give up his dream of medical school and deal with the racism he faced at every turn, but who accomplished so much despite the obstacles in his way.

Hooks has included some interesting back matter, namely more about blue babies and Vivien Thomas, a useful glossary, and the source's she used to write this book.

Tiny Stitches is an excellent addition to any STEM library. It is also the kind of book I never would have read as a young reader simply because it probably wouldn't have existed. But, thankfully, that's beginning to change now so that more and more we are being introduced to heroes of color that we never would have known about otherwise.

This book is recommended for readers age 7+

This book was iBook received from Edelweiss/Above the Treeline and the publisher, Lee & Low Books

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## **Sonia Gensler says**

A very informative, endearing, and even suspenseful account of Vivien Thomas' life and work, written in clear, eloquent prose by Gwendolyn Hooks and enhanced by the beautiful watercolor art of Colin Bootman. Truly a must-have for school and home libraries!

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## **Jill says**

Vivien Thomas dreamed of becoming a doctor from a young age, but most schools in Tennessee were segregated and moreover cost a great deal of money. But he wanted to be as close to the practice of medicine as he could. At a job interview for a research assistant at the Vanderbilt Medical School, he convinced Dr. Alfred Blalock to hire him. Thomas was so good that before long, he was doing his own experiments. He also learned surgical techniques, and “Dr. Blalock was impressed by Vivien’s tiny stitches.”

One day, however, Thomas learned that while white men with his duties were called “research technicians” and earned more money, his official job title was “janitor” and he earned less. He told Dr. Blalock he would quit unless he made the amount commensurate with his actual the job description and a few days later, he noticed his paycheck had increased.

When Dr. Blalock was asked to become Chief of Surgery at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore in 1941, he accepted on the condition that Vivien Thomas would be hired also. Thomas and his family had a hard time finding housing in segregated Baltimore, and Johns Hopkins was even more segregated than Vanderbilt had been. But, as the author reports, “Viven refused to let the prejudice of others interfere with his work.”

When a pediatric cardiologist, Dr. Helen Taussig, asked Dr. Blalock to help with the problem of babies born with heart defects, known then as “blue babies,” Blalock assigned Thomas to do the research. Thomas not only came up with the cause but also a solution. He tried out his surgery on research animals, with Dr. Blalock assisting only once. On November 29, 1944, Dr. Taussig asked for help with a baby that would die without immediate surgery. Dr. Blalock had to do the actual surgery but he needed Vivien Thomas to stand on a stool behind him and guide him through the operation.

The baby survived. After two more successful operations, Drs. Blalock and Taussig wrote a paper describing the procedure which they named “the Blalock-Taussig shunt.” They received coverage in Time and Life, but of course Vivien Thomas’s name did not appear anywhere.

Meanwhile, Johns Hopkins got inundated with requests for the surgery, and Thomas remained behind Dr. Blalock on a stool, coaching him through more than one hundred fifty operations.

In 1947, Drs. Blalock and Taussig were nominated for the Nobel prize in Medicine for the procedure.

Vivien Thomas was not publicly acknowledged for his research and surgical innovations until 1971 when a group of doctors he had trained opted to grant him recognition. In 1976, Johns Hopkins awarded him an honorary doctorate degree and appointed him to the faculty as Instructor of Surgery.

The author concludes: “Today about forty thousand children are born each year with heart problems. Because of Vivien Thomas, these children now have a chance to live full and healthy lives.”

At the end of the book, there is more information about the “blue baby” heart defect (technically “tetralogy of Fallot”) and about Vivien Thomas. In this section, the author mentions some of the people helped and inspired by Thomas, including an elevator operator at Johns Hopkins who, because of Vivien Thomas, became a surgical technician and later the first African American physician’s assistant in the cardiac department at Johns Hopkins Hospital. There is also a small glossary of medical terms, and a list of sources.

Full-page watercolors by Colin Bootman with a muted palette display his usual talent; he excels at showing nuanced emotion.

**Evaluation:** Without any education past high school, Thomas overcame racism and poverty to become a cardiac surgery pioneer. But the historical and scientific world took a long time to acknowledge his contributions. This book will help show readers a side of racism with which they may not be aware, and perhaps lead them to question how many others have been overlooked because of the color of their skin, or gender, or sexual orientation.

**Rating:** 4.5/5

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### **Edward Sullivan says**

Excellent picture book biography about Vivien Thomas, an African American surgical technician whose achievement in developing a life-saving surgical procedure went unacknowledged for a quarter of a century because of his race. Compelling and inspiring.

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