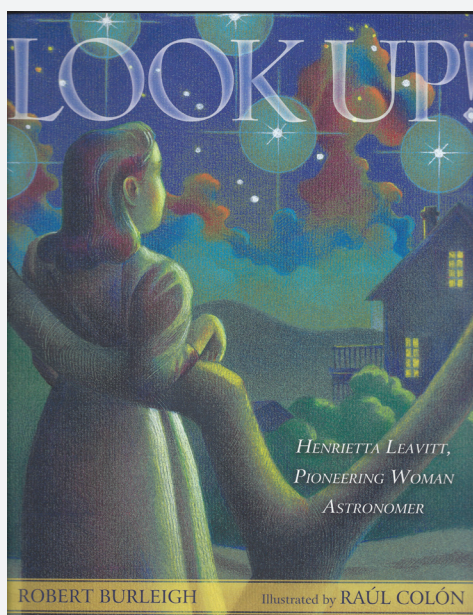


## First Opinion: Look to the Stars

Burleigh, Robert. *Look Up! Henrietta Leavitt, Pioneering Woman Astronomer*. Illus. Raúl Colón. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster for Young Readers, 2013. Print.

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Written by Robert Burleigh and illustrated by Raúl Colón, *Look Up! Henrietta Leavitt, Pioneering Woman Astronomer* beautifully tells the story of a woman whose important discoveries in the early twentieth century led to a system of measuring the distance of the solar system. *Look Up!* joins the ranks of recent children's books like *Me . . . Jane*, *Rachel Carson and Her Book That Changed the World*, and *Of Numbers and Stars: The Story of Hypatia*. These books provide young readers with role models of women in STEM fields—fields of study that often were and still are dominated by men. Most remarkable about Burleigh's contribution to this important trend is that *Look Up!* confronts Henrietta's anomalous, pioneering position as an astronomer during a time when women were not even allowed to use a telescope.

The book opens with a young, curious Henrietta sitting on her parents' front porch, "gazing up at the stars" (1–2). In these first few pages, Raúl Colón's softly textured illustrations draw readers in and set the tone of the story. Throughout the book, the color scheme remains warm, and the images seem to be always subtly illuminated by starlight. It is not the stars, however, that are the focus of these first few pages; rather, the figure of Henrietta dominates the page, letting readers know that this is a story of becoming for the astronomer.

The strongest section of the book moves from Henrietta's time at Radcliffe, where she was "one of the very few women students," to her time working at the Harvard College Observatory. The heart of Burleigh's story offers readers not only a vivid description of Henrietta's journey and important discoveries, but also a history lesson. Readers learn that "when Henrietta was a young woman, almost all astronomy teachers and students were men" (5). The accompanying illustration in this spread shows a studious Henrietta flanked by men whose eyes mark both suspicion and incredulity to have a woman among them. The men's eyes work to draw the reader's own eyes to the focus of the story, Henrietta, and to emphasize her uncharacteristic presence in the astronomy classroom. Burleigh does not simply tell the story of an astronomer who happens to be a woman; Henrietta's gender is important to the telling of her story, and Burleigh's handling of the subject opens up important topics of discussion for children, educators, and parents.

Burleigh continues to address issues of gender inequality in the early twentieth century as he explains Henrietta's job at the Observatory and her fascination with the "lives of great astronomers" (10). Readers learn that Henrietta was not allowed to use the giant telescope. Instead, she and other women worked as "human computers" and were expected to "work, not think" (9). Burleigh explains Henrietta's devotion to her studies as she repeats her favorite "sky words" and reads about other astronomers. Notably, the depiction of "great astronomers" is, except the final pages of the book, the only two-page spread illustration, and it includes a painting of constellations and planets along with the figures of Copernicus and Galileo, who are both men.

The author's acknowledgment of Henrietta as a representative of other women in science is important. However, one of the few problems with the book is that Henrietta remains an anomaly at the end. Men like Copernicus and Galileo were absolutely central figures, but in this story of a pioneering woman astronomer, the message cannot only be one of an uncharacteristic woman. Rather, children's stories about women in STEM should allow girls the opportunity to imagine themselves in such positions. At the back of the book, Burleigh provides a brief list of "some other women astronomers," but, given the two-page emphasis on men, it would be nice to see a similar emphasis on the women who followed in Henrietta's footsteps, perhaps in the two-page spread of the night sky at the end of the story. After all, one of the most important parts of Henrietta's story for young readers—and one that is missing from the book—is that she led the way for other women in science who, like Henrietta, have "other ideas" (9).

In *Look Up!* Burleigh and Colón tell the story of how Henrietta Leavitt's contributions to science expanded our understanding of the sky. The charts she created by only looking at photographs allowed astronomers to measure the distance between the earth and the stars. Because of her work, scientists began to understand that the sky "is so much bigger!" In a similar way, stories like *Look Up!* are important because they open up the world for young readers, especially girls, and like Henrietta, they too can look to the stars and listen to the stories they tell.

### **Works Cited**

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