



Farmer Will Allen and the Growing Table

Jacqueline Briggs Martin , Eric-Shabazz Larkin (Illustrations)

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Will Allen is no ordinary farmer. A former basketball star, he's as tall as his truck, and he can hold a cabbage--or a basketball--in one hand. But what is most special about Farmer Will is that he can see what others can't see. When he looked at an abandoned city lot in Milwaukee he saw a huge table, big enough to feed the whole world.

No space, no problem. Poor soil, there's a solution. Need help, found it. Farmer Will is a genius in solving problems. In 2008, the MacArthur Foundation named him one for his innovative urban farming methods, including aquaponics and hydroponics.

Jacqueline Briggs Martin, author of the Caldecott Medal winner, *Snowflake Bentley*, and *Alice Waters and the Trip to Delicious* , along with debut artist Eric-Shabazz Larkin's striking artwork, tells the inspiring story of the African American innovator, educator, and community builder.

Farmer Will Allen is the first book of Martin's Food Heroes series, followed by *Alice Waters and the Trip to Delicious*. In 2015, it was selected by Points of Light Foundation to set a new Guinness World Record for the most children reading the same book across the globe to promote literacy. Nearly 300,000 participated.

Farmer Will Allen and the Growing Table Details

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From Reader Review Farmer Will Allen and the Growing Table for online ebook

Kathryn says

I enjoyed Farmer Will Allen and the Growing Table and found his an interesting and inspiring story. I'm not sure how feasible some of his goals for urban gardens are but it's a great and worthy dream and I hope that the book inspires many people who might not have thought they could have a "real garden" (of the big, backyard, in-ground variety) to have gardens and grow delicious and healthy fruits and vegetables of their own no matter the size of their home or yard (or lack of yard). I especially appreciated that the message was directed at young people and gave them ways to be empowered in this pursuit.

Tasha says

Will Allen is a farmer who can see the potential where others can't. When he sees a vacant lot, he sees a farm with enough to feed everyone. When he was a boy, he grew up helping care for a large garden that kept their family fed. But Allen did not want to spend his life weeding and digging in the dirt, so he decided to become a basketball player, and he did. But then living in Milwaukee, he saw empty greenhouses standing vacant and realized that he could feed people who had never eaten a fresh vegetable. First though, he had to clear the land and then figure out how to improve his soil so that something could grow there. That was the first time that the neighborhood kids helped out, bringing compost items to feed the worms. Slowly and steadily, a community garden emerged and Will Allen taught others to be farmers too. His Milwaukee farm now gets 20,000 visitors a year so that others can learn to grow gardens where there had only been concrete.

I had seen the documentary, Fresh that includes Will Allen as part of the film about new thinking about food. So I was eager to see a picture book about this inspiring figure. It did not disappoint. Martin captures the natural progression of Allen's life from child eating from the garden to farmer giving other children that same experience and spreading the word about what is possible in an urban setting. Martin's tone throughout has a sense of celebration of Allen and his accomplishments. She captures his own inherent enthusiasm on the page.

Larkin's illustrations are striking. Each could be a poster for farming and urban gardens on their own. Combined into a book, they become a celebration of this large man with an even larger dream. The colors are bright, the textures interesting and the image backgrounds evoke farming and nature.

This picture book biography is a visual feast that invites everyone to its community table. Librarians and teachers in Wisconsin should be particularly interested in adding this to their collection, but it will hold interest in urban and farming areas across the country. Appropriate for ages 6-9.

SamZ says

This is a great biography that would be very interesting, especially for older readers. I loved the chapter formats and the graphic-style illustrations. I wish there were more books like this - biographies geared toward kids and teens about people who have seen a problem and done something about it. I really liked the

idea of growing things not necessarily on a farm, but wherever you are! Definitely encourages me to plant a garden this spring in my postage stamp sized yard!

Margaux says

GREAT book on composting and what it's like to be an urban farmer! Farm2Fork

Maria says

Better for young elementary, not preschool.

Martha says

Farmer Will Allen and the Growing Table tells the story of how a former basketball star returned to his upbringing as a farmer. He transformed barren city blocks into thriving vegetable gardens through the teamwork of the community, who grew and ate their healthy food. A perfect title to share during Earth Day or any day of the year. The illustrations and text are powerful!

Kelly Carey says

The illustrations are cartoonish. It is based on a true story of how one man made a difference in his community.

Earl says

An inspiring account of someone who was able to envision a community powered, naturally fueled food program. And from there, teaching others this model encouraging others that they too can be farmers anytime and anywhere. Includes more information about and a foreword from Will Allen with a resource list of books for schools.

Betsy says

It shouldn't be this hard. You walk to a biography section of a children's room, any children's room, and you start searching for biographies of living people who are not sports stars, actors, musicians or politicians. And you search. And you search. And after a while your eyes kind of droop and you feel a bit sleepy, so you tell yourself you'll continue to search on another day. Don't bother. I can tell you right off that finding biographies of contemporary people who don't fall into the worlds of sports, entertainment, or politics is a fool's errand. Average extraordinary people tend to be lumped in group biographies if anywhere at all.

That's part of what makes *Farmer Will Allen and the Growing Table* such a rarity. Part biography, part paean to urban gardens and gardeners everywhere. The book is a beautiful tribute not just to its hero Will Allen but also to the right of every child to have access to good, healthy, cheap food. The ultimate picture book about muncha muncha muncha.

Actually, I'll level with you. Will Allen really *was* a basketball player. At first anyway. Though he grew up in a family that grew most of its own food, he wasn't a fan of the work. As soon as he could he left those Maryland fields for college and became a professional basketball player in Belgium. While over there a friend asked for some help digging potatoes and the next thing Will knew he was hooked. After moving back to the States he adopted six empty, abandoned greenhouses in Milwaukee. What followed was years of trial and error as Will worked to turn his lots into working gardens. With the help of the community (and more than a few red wigglers) Will didn't just get those greenhouses working, but city garden plots around the country too. Now he speaks everywhere from Kenya to London, teaching people how to grow food for themselves. The good news? Will Allen sees things other people can't. And "when he sees kids, he sees farmers".

I think there's a danger of adults falling into this belief that kids only want to read about other kids. Our memories of childhood may skew a bit, and when we think of books written for children, a lot of the time we assume that kids aren't going to want to read about people too much older than themselves. Of course, as one friend of mine put it recently, "That's what people who don't interact with kids at all think." It is far from the truth. Children love hearing about adults. Adults hold an allure of their very own. For a child, reading about adults offers them both distance ("I will never be that old") and promise ("I could live that life"). But to write a book for kids about an adult that isn't a household name (yet) you need a good author. Enter Jacqueline Briggs Martin.

Now Ms. Martin holds the distinction of being one of the very few nonfiction picture book authors to win a Caldecott Award for one of her books (*Snowflake Bentley*). Typically Caldecotts go to fictional fare. That's not born out of any innate prejudice. It's more that until recently there haven't been great swaths of fabulous illustrated nonfiction to choose from. Ms. Martin's books seek to change all that and *Farmer Will Allen* is a step in the right direction. As an author, Ms. Martin has never gone with expected topics, though in this particular case she's showing her hand. You see back in 1997 she penned *The Green Truck Garden Giveaway A Neighborhood Story and Almanac*. In that book she told the tale of two people who drive around in a truck giving away little "bucket gardens". Clearly her love of gardening in unexpected places has only grown in the intervening sixteen years.

In *Will Allen* Martin translates her love of gardening into an honestly good story. In general, realistic lives aren't tailor made for literature. Life is too messy. Too complicated. What Martin is capable of doing then is of plucking only the essentials from Mr. Allen. That done, she sets about talking about healthy food, a difficult topic if only because a lesser author would give in to the temptation to preach. We live in an era where fatty, salty, oily food is so much cheaper than food that is good for us. Fruits and vegetables are sold everywhere but they aren't free. So while we talk about the rise in obesity levels in the United States, it just makes sense to talk about how economics affect access to healthy alternatives. And part of what makes *Farmer Will Allen* such a good story is that it draws that connection without getting anywhere near a soapbox.

If you had told me after reading this that this was illustrator Eric-Shabazz Larkin's first book for children I would not have believed you. Indeed, I'm having a hard time believing it even after I looked up his biography. The fact of the matter is that even when a magnificently talented artist attempts their first picture book for kids, they usually have a hard time with the design and layout. The truth? Most of the time it feels

like they're phoning it in. Not Larkin. With ink and pen and markers (as well as some digital work for flair), the man constructs a life. He knows where to put the text and how to incorporate it into the images. Basketballs turn effortlessly into potatoes. The Statue of Liberty is pictured holding a bunch of beets and somehow manages to look imposing and impressive rather than downright ridiculous. There are color washes in this book that glow on the page and the typography (which I normally never notice) is magnificent. Now as to the question of accuracy, I suspect that Larkin didn't do too much research in terms of Allen's home life as a child. When we see little Will Allen standing in a child's version of his customary blue sleeveless t-shirt and green baseball hat, we're straining the edges of credulity. That said, the image is more representational than a strict history. I think I'm okay with it. Faux dialogue in nonfiction picture books tends to drive me nutty, but imagined childhoods? Personally it raises no red flags for me. You might feel differently.

I can tell you right now that *Farmer Will Allen and the Growing Table* will not be shelved in my library's biography section. Maybe you see that as a mistake, but for me it's the only way to get the doggone thing into the hands of readers. The likelihood that a child is going to walk into a library anywhere (except possibly Milwaukee) saying, "I want a biography of Will Allen" is slim at best. The likelihood of a kid walking in saying, "I need a book on city gardens" or urban gardens, or composting, or gardening in general, is significantly higher. As a librarian, my job is to get this book into the hands of as many readers as possible. Fortunately, Martin's topic and Larkin's art combined with Allen's story make this a sure-fire winner. We live in an era where food is falling under greater and greater scrutiny. Apply those standards to your child's nonfiction picture book fare and *Farmer Will Allen and the Growing Table* passes all the tests with flying colors. Fun and informative by turns, raise a carrot or cabbage in honor of this awesome dude and his equally awesome tale.

For ages 4-8.

Dolly says

Inspiring, informative and entertaining, this is a great book for young readers to help them learn more about the importance of connecting with the earth, finding out about where our food comes from, and more importantly learning to grow fruits and vegetables.

In an age when many children can't identify even some of the most common vegetables (see this episode of Jamie Oliver's **Food Revolution**), I am so impressed that Mr. Allen is bringing farming to urban areas and helping to expose more children to the concepts of growing fresh and healthy food.

I thought the narrative was good for children of all ages and the illustrations are vibrantly colorful and nicely detailed. We really enjoyed reading this book together.

This book was featured as one of the selections for the May 2015 Farmers and Farming-themed reads for the Picture-Book Club in the Children's Books Group here at Goodreads.

Karen Witzler says

A children's picture book biography of a former basketball star who began an urban gardening movement in

Milwaukee called Growing Power. The book captures his enthusiasm for his subject and its potential to change urban landscapes and food distribution systems. Will Allen's use of vermiculture (red wriggler earthworms) and composting to rebuild soil is a highlight as is his willingness to experiment and re-purpose both space and objects for urban food production. The book captures the pioneering attitude of this man and his project.

Allison says

"Farmer Will Allen and the Growing Table" is an inspiring story about how former professional basketball player Will Allen transformed empty, run down city lots into flourishing, innovative greenhouses and gardens, teaching city kids about gardening, hard work, and healthy eating along the way. He runs into several problems with poor soil and composting with the wrong kinds of food that accidentally kills the needed worms, but after lots of studying, he is able to clean the soil and collect the right kind of compost for the worms. This book is rich with information presented in an exciting way. I also think the fact that Will is a former pro basketball player will really help the boys in the classroom buy into the story. My fiction text choice, "First Peas to the Table" by Susanna Grigsby, is told from the point of view of Maya, a grade school girl whose class is having a pea growing contest, based on the contest Thomas Jefferson used to have with friends where whoever grows enough peas to fill a bowl first is the winner. Maya is so excited about this project and she works diligently to care for her plants. She keeps detailed journals of what works and what doesn't, and uses tips from Thomas Jefferson's own gardening journals. Maya's best friend Shakayla seems to be having better luck with her plants, but instead of jealousy and hurt feelings, there is supportiveness and wisdom beyond their years. This is a very cool book and the fact that there are so many realistic elements about science, (gardening, plant life cycle, composting), and history, (facts about Thomas Jefferson), coupled with the easy to follow narrative make this an excellent twin text for Farmer Will Allen and the Growing Table. Both Maya and Will struggle with obstacles to growing their plants at first, and must gain some scientific knowledge before they are successful. Science would be a good content crossover for both of these book, and could include making a classroom garden or letting individual students each grow a plant using composting materials learned about in the books, or doing a contest, and letting them plan to eat what they grow and incorporating a lesson on healthy foods. You could even cross over to social studies and do a character study on Will Allen and find even more former pro athletes who have gone on to do things outside of sports. I would use these texts with third grade, and would have students work on a KWL chart on their knowledge of plant growing techniques before and after reading each book.

Amanda says

Brilliant. Madam and I read this together and we both loved this. Very inspiring. At the end, Madam told me that she wants to visit Milwaukee now and see Will Allen's farm. That's what I'm talking about.

Jenny says

I enjoyed this true story of Will Allen and his dream to help people grow gardens even in urban areas. While I know some parts of his dream have not been realized, it is encouraging to see community gardens and school gardens becoming more common in my city as well as other cities. I have a neighbor that is involved

in opening a brand new charter high school where the focus will be on agriculture...growing crops, raising livestock, veterinary medicine and so on. Some positive steps in the right direction.

Christen says

A call for children to be inspired by Will Allen to think about gardening and fresh produce being made more accessible to all, especially urban communities. A little wordy for a read aloud, but could pair nicely with outside activities or a community garden project.
