The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation, Vol. 1: The Pox Party

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Reviewer: Cassandra Fugal
Reading Level: Young adult
Rating: Outstanding
Genre: Historical fiction;
Subject: Slavery--Juvenile fiction; Freedom--Juvenile fiction; United States--History--Revolution, 1775-1783--Juvenile fiction; Books--Reviews;

Octavian seems to live a life of privilege. He and his mother (an African Princess) live secluded from the world in a Boston mansion in the years leading up the American Revolution. They wear the finest clothes, entertain scholars who live in the mansion, and receive the finest classical education of the day. As Octavian grows he comes to realize that the life of privilege is a hoax; he and his mother are slaves being used to as the subjects of scientific experiments in Novanglian College of Lucidity to test the mental capabilities of Africans (headquartered at the mansion). When the benefactor who funds the college dies, the scientists who conduct experiments at the college must change the nature of their experiments to gain funding from wealthy southern land and slave holders. One of the experiments ends with the death of Octavian's mother, and he flees, becoming a fiddler for soldiers in the fight against the British.

Like many of the books Anderson has written, this story plays with language to create a spell binding story. The majority of the story is told through Octavian. While the language Octavian employs is archaic to today's reader, it helps to emphasis the scholarly environment in which Octavian grew up and to distance the reader from the horrific events that occur in his life. Octavian's life is astonishing and Anderson has done an astonishing job in telling it.