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Summer Birds: The Butterflies of Maria Merian

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Reviewer: Laurien Clay  
Reading Level: Preschool, Primary  
Rating: Excellent  
Genre: Biographies, Informational books;  
Subject: Caterpillars--Juvenile literature; Butterflies--Metamorphosis--Juvenile literature; Merian, Maria Sibylla, 1647-1717--Juvenile literature; Books--Reviews;

Maria Merian is a girl with an abnormal fascination for one her age and gender: insects. While others believe that butterflies—summer birds—and other bugs come supernaturally from mud, Maria believes otherwise. In secret, she studies how caterpillars turn into butterflies, knowing that she would be accused of witchcraft if found out. She documents her studies in the forms of brilliant paintings and eventually has them published to prove to the world that bugs are beautiful, not evil.

Engle and Paschkis work together to portray not only a true story, but a feast for the sight and the mind. Engle promotes a true understanding of nature with her clear and detailed prose, and Paschkis holds the reader enthralled with her vividly imaginative illustrations. However, these illustrations, while gorgeous, are more imaginative than historically accurate. The costumes of the characters are painted to look like they are either from the Renaissance or Medieval Ages, when in reality the time period is Baroque. Additionally, the illustration of Maria printing her book is most likely inaccurate, as someone else would have printed her book for her. Despite these shortcomings, the illustrations do depict accurately the life cycle of the butterfly and therefore would be of good use when teaching an insect unit in the classroom. Engle is both a Pura Belpré Award and Newbery Honor winner.

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