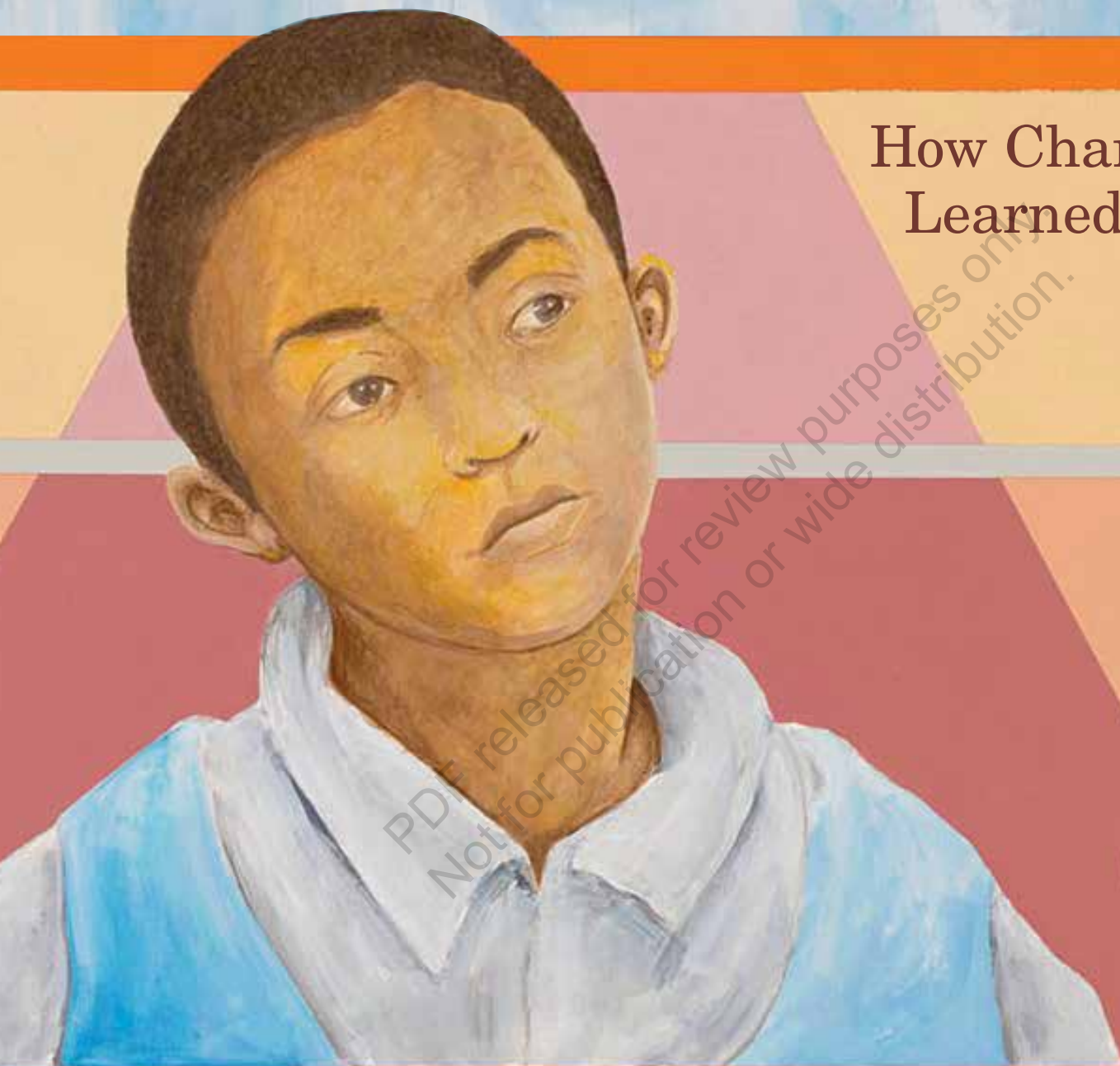


Grandpa and the Library

How Charles White
Learned to Paint



C. Ian White

MoMA

An abstract painting featuring a dense composition of vertical and horizontal brushstrokes in various shades of blue, white, and light grey. The texture is visible, suggesting a thick application of paint. The overall effect is a complex, layered visual field.

Grandpa and the Library

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C. Ian White

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Dad, where are we going?

We're going to the library to see a mural painted
by your Grandpa Charles.



Gordon, look! The words on the mural say, “Love, hope, dignity, and education.” This is what he believed in, and this is what he wanted to share in his art.

*How did Grandpa Charles become an artist?
Did he start when he was very young? As young as me?*

Even younger, Gordon. It started when Charles—my father—was about to turn five years old.



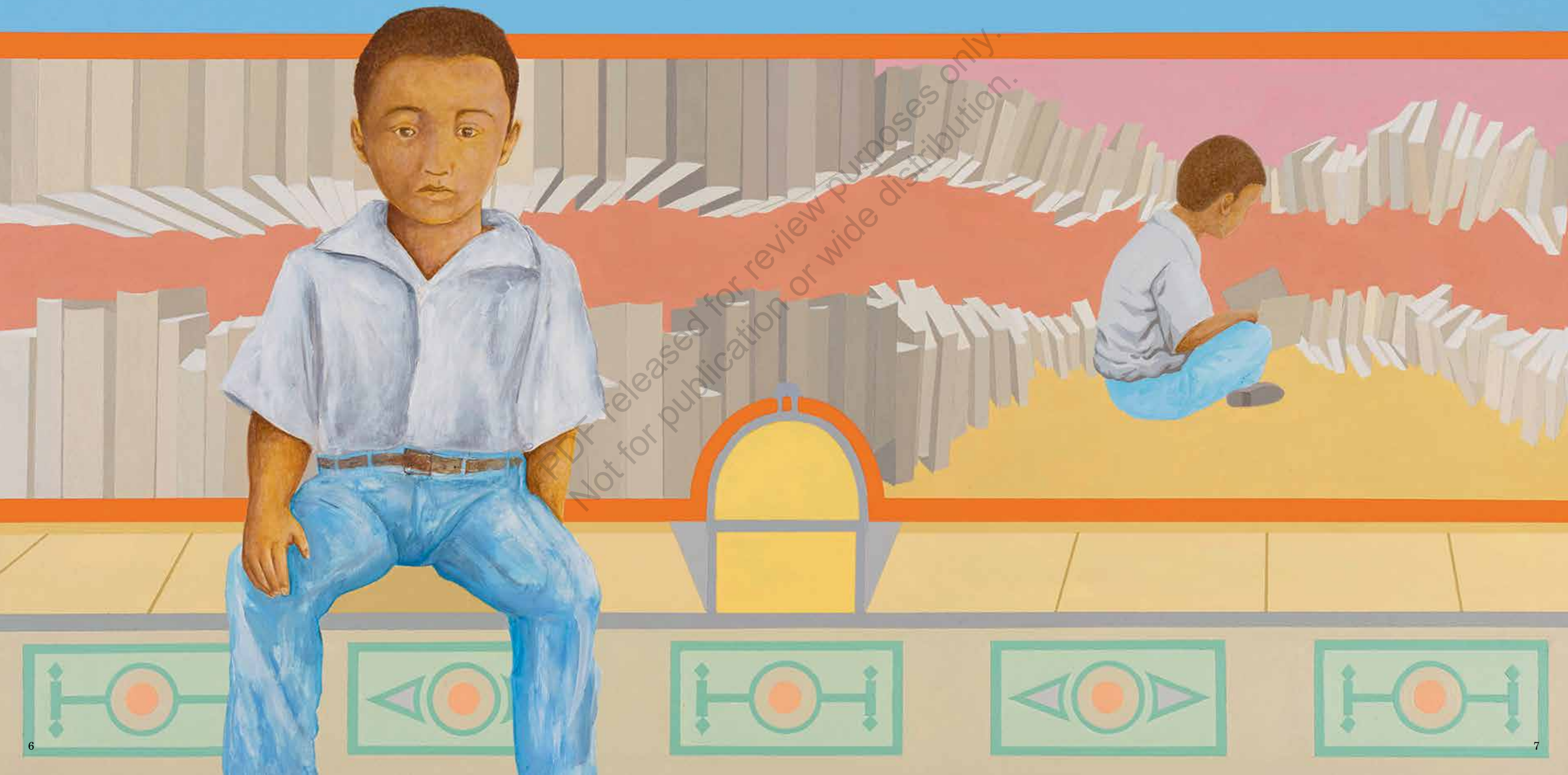
Your Great-Grandma Marsh worked long days cleaning houses, and Charles was too old to go to work with her. There were no preschools or daycare centers when your grandpa was five, and babysitters were too expensive.

So she took him to the Chicago Public Library each morning with his lunch box. She reminded him to be polite, and then she went to work.

She left him at the library all day? Alone?

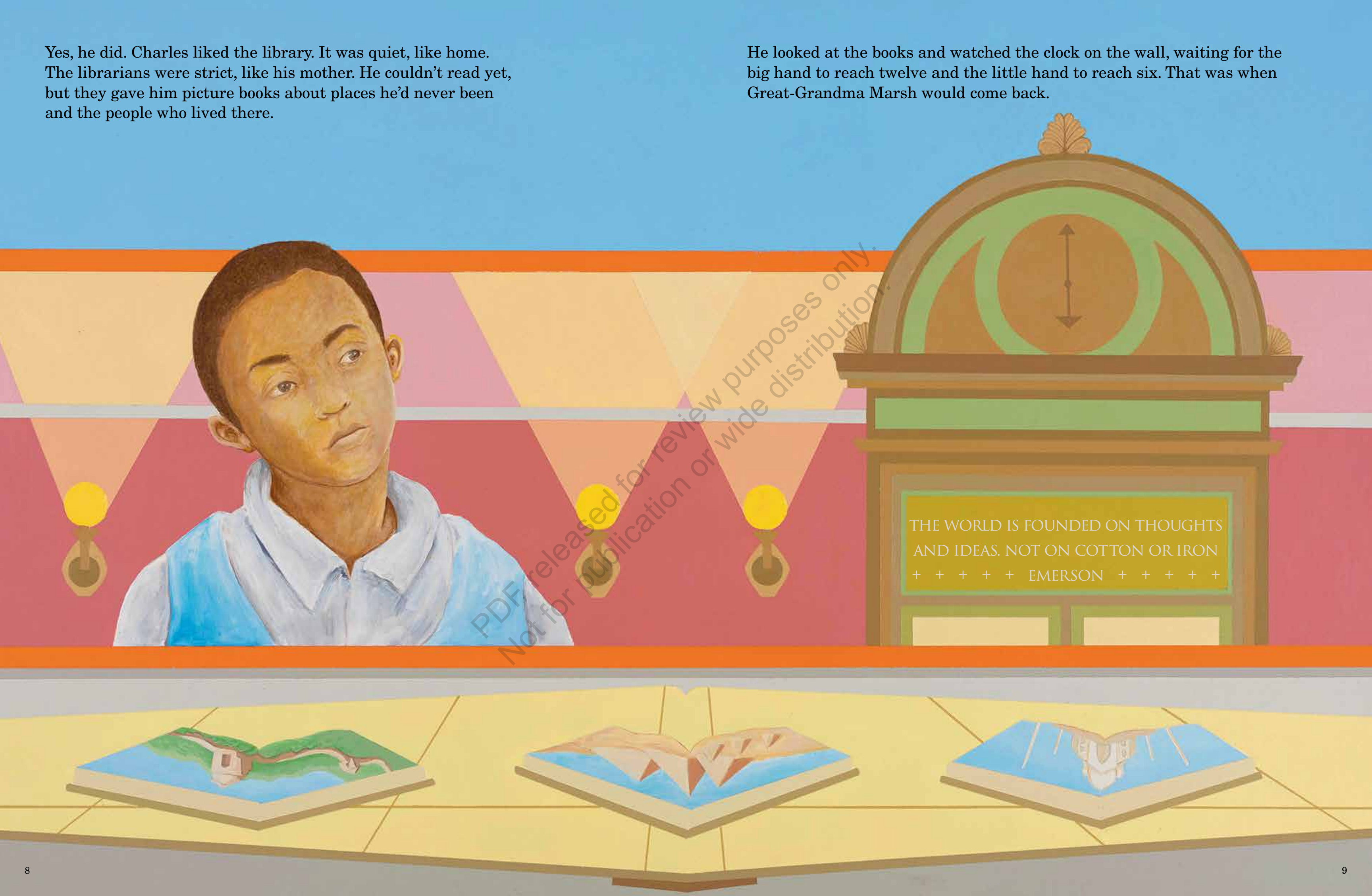
Yes, all day. Great-Grandma Marsh assured the librarian that her son was a very well-mannered young man who would sit nicely in the corner with his books.

And he did?



Yes, he did. Charles liked the library. It was quiet, like home. The librarians were strict, like his mother. He couldn't read yet, but they gave him picture books about places he'd never been and the people who lived there.

He looked at the books and watched the clock on the wall, waiting for the big hand to reach twelve and the little hand to reach six. That was when Great-Grandma Marsh would come back.





Charles White with his mother,
Ethelene Gary Marsh, 1958
The Charles White Archives

I look to the life of my people as the fountainhead of challenging scenes and monumental concepts.
—Charles White

Charles White was born in 1918, in Chicago, where in the 1930s he became a critical member of a budding community of African American artists. His career took him to New York, through the American South and Mexico, and ultimately to Los Angeles, where he lived and worked for more than twenty years. In all of these places, White contributed to the local art scenes and established ties with a range of creative people: writers, musicians, and performers as well as other visual artists. In addition to being a highly skilled draftsman, painter, and printmaker, he was a dedicated teacher, and he helped inspire and shape the careers of several generations of artists.

White made work that is figurative and representational, featuring images of African Americans drawn from history and tradition to reveal and celebrate their considerable, if often overlooked, accomplishments. His goal, he said, was “to make a very broad universal statement about the search for dignity, the search for a deeper understanding of the conflicts and contradictions of life. . . . What I’m trying to do is talk about the history of humanity.” By the time of his death in 1979, White was widely admired for his “images of dignity” and his efforts to share his vision with the widest possible audience.



Charles White working on *Five Great American Negroes*, 1939
The Museum of Modern Art Archives



Charles White working on the mural
Mary McLeod Bethune, 1977
The Charles White Archives

This book is dedicated to my mother and father, Frances and Charles, to my wife, Virginia, and to my son, Gordon.

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