



## Impact Statement

Akzhan Mukhatai, Grade 8

***The Light of Ancient Voices***, 2026

Acrylic on paper, 16.5 x 11.5 inches

Nazarbayev Intellectual School of Physics and Mathematics, Uralsk, Kazakhstan

Unsung Hero: Mary Anning

I've always admired paleontologists, their amazing ability to deduce information about ancient animals from only fragments of fossils. Their skill is incredibly precise and accurate, allowing them to construct entire skeletons from various fragments, building a new understanding of the world. However, I'm amazed that paleontology didn't even have a name in the 19th century and was considered more of a hobby than a serious science. One such person who was fascinated by fossils was Mary Anning—the first female paleontologist, becoming an important pioneer in paleontology. But she wasn't just an amateur; she was a tenacious, incredibly intelligent, and courageous person who laid the foundation for the entire field of paleontology. I chose her as my role model because her story showed me that, despite all the difficulties and rejection, she maintained her passion for paleontology and was loyal to her family.

Mary Anning was born in 1799 to a poor family on the coast of Lyme Regis. Mary's childhood was difficult, from an early age forced to provide for her family after her father died when she was 11. She and her father often walked along the beach, collecting various curiosities and shells. One day, she found a large seashell, which she was able to sell to a tourist for a large sum of money. After this, she realized that she could support the family in this way and continue her father's work, risking her life. Together with her brother, they began searching for more curiosities, and their mother sold them in her small shop. At the age of 12, Mary managed to discover the first complete fossil of an ichthyosaur, which broke many religious barriers. Scientists discussed the find for a long time, but never mentioned who found it, especially the uneducated and poor woman who was simply lucky. The further my research progressed, the more convinced I became that Mary was a most determined person. I couldn't stop admiring her tenacity and passion for knowledge.

All of Mary Anning's credits were attributed to collectors and geologists, as she was forced to sell them to provide for her family. Despite this, Mary, full of determination, read books and conducted research on dead creatures to prove her honest work. Thus, from a self-taught person with no formal education, she became a true expert who could easily argue with professional geologists and scientists. Some of her subsequent, equally important discoveries were the skeleton of a Plesiosaurus, the discovery of a second pterodactyl, and the "hunt for fossil poop." The discovery of her skeletons and coprolites played a crucial role in science, ultimately unraveling major mysteries and building a scientific discipline that is still used today. But of course, her colleagues took credit for all her achievements. Eventually, her mineral-rich

banks in the city dried up. Despite her constant risking of life and her courage, she was struck down by breast cancer at 46, after which she lived for another two years. Men who considered her achievements their own decided to support her financially in the final years of her life, when the full truth was just beginning to unfold. But it was too late. As I read and analyzed it all, I wondered: what if she had been recognized at the very beginning? She could have lived peacefully without worrying about money and scientific community dominated by men. Perhaps she could have cured her disease. But her resoluteness and courage helped open people's eyes; she was able to change perceptions of the universe, leaving an immortal legacy and exerting a social influence on gender stereotypes.

My artistic vision emerged more from artistic intuition than from a cold structure that revealed clarity. First and foremost, I wanted to convey the desired atmosphere using colors reminiscent of the ocean depths where all the most ancient creatures lived. The use of deep blues with transitions was necessary to immerse the viewer in the atmosphere of deep oceans with secrets, where Mary brings these secrets to light. It is as if she is diving deep into the depths to solve the mystery. The brightly colored areas around Mary and her ammonite deliberately illuminate them and highlight them in the composition. The light around Mary reveals her genius and the gift of seeing what many cannot. Although she had no formal education, she possessed the light of knowledge that allowed her to see the truth. You can also see various creatures emerging from the illuminated ammonite. For me, this shell in her hand is not just a stone but a window to the past, and the ancient creatures symbolize Mary's ability to resurrect extinct worlds. In the background, I depicted a semi-ghostly skull with a trailing spine. The skull was intentionally depicted as ghostly, not alive, to show how Mary is a conduit between two worlds, as if she were trying to connect to them. Mary herself stands upright and confident, holding a hammer firmly in her hand; she is depicted as strong and persistent.

Mary Anning's story made me see difficulties from a different perspective. Even when everyone turned their backs on Mary and rejected her as a scientist, she continued her work. This inspires me to be more persistent and confident in my decisions and never give up because of other people's opinions and stereotypes. If I face an obstacle but press forward with the same tenacity Mary showed on the cliffs. Even now, as I write this essay at 4 a.m., I could have given up and gone to bed long ago. But I remember Mary Anning on the Cold Shore and know for sure that I'm doing everything right.

My goal will be to try to exhibit my work at school and show my drawing to as many people as possible. Then they will start to wonder who I drew, and then I will tell them the story of a great and courageous woman who changed the entire world, so that the world will not forget her legacy.