



Classroom Guide for
DEAR MRS. PARKS
A Dialogue with Today's Youth
by **Rosa Parks**
with **Gregory J. Reed**

Reading Level

Interest Level: Grades 1-5

Reading Level: Grades 2-3

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.7/2.0

Lexile Measure®: 850

Scholastic Reading Counts!™:5.4

Themes:

Self-Esteem/Identity, Civil Rights, Family, History, African Americans, Discrimination, Religion/Spiritual, Nonfiction, Remarkable Women, Young Adult

Synopsis

In this book Rosa Parks shares some of the many thousands of letters she receives from young people around the world. The letters not only ask about Mrs. Parks' life and experiences, but they reflect the timeless concerns that youth face about personal and societal issues. In her careful and heartfelt responses, Rosa Parks displays the same authority and dignity she showed the world in 1955 when she refused to give up her seat to a white man on a racially segregated city bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Her message is one of compassion and hope. Says Parks, "It is my prayer that my legacy . . . will be a source of inspiration and strength to all who receive it."

Dear Mrs. Parks has won many accolades including the NAACP Image Award, Teachers' Choices Award, Notable Children's Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies, and Blackboard Book of the Year in Children's Literature.

Background

Rosa Parks was born on February 4, 1913, in Tuskegee, Alabama. She made history when in December 1955, she refused to give up her seat to a white

passenger on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus and move to the back of the bus, racial segregation of this type was the norm in southern states. The so-called Jim Crow laws kept blacks and whites apart in almost all aspects of life. There were separate entrances for blacks in public buildings. Other places such as restrooms, drinking fountains, hospitals, restaurants, libraries, and places of worship were completely separate. Segregation in schools had only been terminated by the U.S. Supreme Court the year before in a landmark case—*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. The decision to integrate schools angered many white people. In Alabama, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) began a campaign of intimidation. Other racist organizations were formed as well. In November 1955, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation on interstate buses was banned, but the buses that most blacks in Montgomery rode were owned by the city, and Rosa Parks' action violated Alabama segregation law. After her arrest, the black community of Montgomery, led by a young minister, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., staged a boycott of city buses. The boycott lasted more than a year, until on December 20, 1956, the Supreme Court declared bus segregation in Montgomery unconstitutional. For many people, Parks' action was the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, and she is affectionately referred to as the "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement."

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

Before reading the book, you may wish to have students discuss one or more of the following questions as a motivation for reading.

1. What is your definition of courage? Who are some of the people you know who have exhibited courage? What did they do?
2. When you want advice, whom do you ask? Why?
3. What do you think it means to be a productive member of society?
4. What is hope? What are the things you hope for?
5. Why are respect and dignity important to people?
6. How does learning about the past help you understand the present and the future?
7. How can attitude change the way you learn things?

Teaching Tip

You may wish to feature this book as part of your celebration of Women's History Month, which is celebrated in March.

Exploring the Book

Discuss the book title and ask students what they think the book will be about. Why would Rosa Parks have a dialog with today's youth? What do you think she has to say to young people?

Show students the back cover of the book and mention that there are quotes there from former President Jimmy Carter and Marian Wright Edelman, President of The Children's Defense Fund. Ask students why they think these famous people wrote passages for the back of the book.

Draw students' attention to the different parts of *Dear Mrs. Parks*. Review and discuss the function of parts of a nonfiction book such as the table of contents, preface, foreword, introduction, dedication, and afterword. Point out that this book also has additional information including a time line and where to write to Mrs. Parks.

Have students note how the book is illustrated. Why does Mrs. Parks' picture on the cover look like a stamp? Why are there postmarks and reproductions of stamps throughout the book?

Setting a Purpose for Reading

After students have examined the book, ask them to write in a reading journal what they hope to learn from reading *Dear Mrs. Parks*.

Vocabulary

Explain that the book contains numerous words which are related to the Civil Rights Movement. For example:

assassination	boycott	demonstration	discrimination
equality	harassment	injustice	integrate
lynched	movement	nonviolence	persecuted
segregation	unconstitutional		

Have students work with partners to make crossword puzzles or word searches using these words. Remind students that they must write definitions for the words they use.

You may also want to explain and discuss terms such as Jim Crow, the KKK, and the NAACP.

AFTER READING

Discussion Questions

After reading the book, use these questions to generate discussion and expand students' understanding of the text and what Rosa Parks stands for. Encourage students to refer back to the text to support their responses.

1. Why does Rosa Parks say that she "considers all children as mine"?
2. What was Rosa Parks' education like? How did she use it to help herself?
3. Why does Mrs. Parks believe that every child should have the opportunity to attend college or get other instruction after high school?
4. Why does she say that "reading is essential to life"?

5. How would you describe Rosa Parks' attitude toward life?
6. Why did Rosa Parks decide not to give up her seat on the bus in 1955?
7. How did Rosa Parks show that she was a determined person long before the events of 1955?
8. Why were churches so important during the Civil Rights Movement?
9. Why does Rosa Parks feel that communication with people around the globe is so important?
10. What does Rosa Parks mean when she writes about "going the extra mile"?
11. How would you summarize the message that Rosa Parks wants to communicate to young people?

Literature Circles*

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing the roles of group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to those in the Discussion Question section of this guide to help group members understand the book.
- The **Passage Locator** might find examples of specific advice that Rosa Parks offers that might be worthwhile exploring.
- The **Illustrator** might draw pictures to illustrate events from the life of Rosa Parks that are mentioned in her responses to letters.
- The **Connector** might find other books that explain more about the world in which Rosa Parks grew up and the way she changed that world.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might find more information about the organization Mrs. Parks founded called the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Two such books you may wish to refer to are: *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 1994) and *Literature Circles Resource Guide* by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

Reader's Response Journal

To help students engage with the text, encourage them to keep reader's response journals in which they record their personal thoughts about the book. Here are some questions students might respond to in their journals.

1. In her book, Rosa Parks offers lots of advice. Which advice means the most to you? Why?

2. Rosa Parks says, "Books can take you on journeys you will never forget." Tell about a book that has taken you on such a journey.
3. Mrs. Parks talks about making a difference. Although she is now well-known for her refusal to give up a bus seat in 1955, at the time of the event, she was alone and acted very quietly. How do you think people can make a difference? How would you go about addressing a wrong?
4. "You can drown yourself with problems if you do not ask questions," says Mrs. Parks. What does she mean by this? What kinds of questions do you think it is important to ask?
5. Mrs. Parks wants her legacy to be "a source of inspiration and strength to all who receive it." What do you want your legacy to be?

Other Writing Activities

Ask students to respond to one or more of the following writing activities.

1. Suggest that students write their own letters to Mrs. Parks. They might ask her advice about a personal matter or a larger, societal issue.
2. Remind students that Rosa Parks talks about good role models in her life. Ask students to write a description of someone who is an important role model to them.
3. In one of her responses, Rosa Parks points out that although much has been accomplished in the last 50 or so years, there is still much to be done in this world. Write an essay about what you would like to see happen to make this world a better place.
4. Rosa Parks has been honored in numerous ways. She has won many awards. Streets and parks have been named after her. She is often called the Mother of the Civil Rights Movement. Her former home in Montgomery has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places. There is even a move to have her birthday designated as a national holiday.

How would you honor Rosa Parks? Write a description of what you would say and do.

Teacher Tip

In 1999, Congress voted to give its highest award, the Congressional Medal of Freedom, to Rosa Parks. As part of your Women's History Month celebrations, students might research other women who have received this award.

ESL Teaching Activities

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners or who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. Have ESL students work with a strong English speaker to read and go over passages from the book. Suggest that students try to simplify each letter published in the book to the basic question(s) asked and each of Mrs. Parks' responses to the main idea.
2. Encourage ESL students to use the photographs and art to aid them in comprehension.
3. Ask ESL students to write or dictate questions about the book. Set aside time to help students explore these queries.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

To help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas, introduce some of the following activities.

Language Arts

Remind students that *Dear Mrs. Parks* is based on letters. Mention that the letters in the book appear in a simplified form that makes it easier for the reader. Point out, however, that it is important to know the correct form for friendly and business letters. Use the opportunity to teach a mini-lesson in letter writing forms and punctuation.

Social Studies

1. Students might research and make a time line of important events in the Civil Rights Movement beginning with Rosa Parks' arrest in 1955. Encourage students to explore the topics on the Internet, where there is a wealth of information.
2. Interested students might read about and report on other important leaders of the movement including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Civics

Review with students how Rosa Parks feels about dignity and respect. Then work with students to compose a classroom code of conduct that ensures dignity and respect for everyone.

Music

If possible, get a copy of the CD and music video called "Tribute to Mrs. Rosa Parks" made in 1995 to honor her. Set aside time to play these for students.

Art

Students might make collages in recognition of Rosa Parks. Suggest that students include photographs from old magazines, headlines from newspapers, slogans, buttons, and other reminders of the Civil Rights Movement. Or, students might want to focus on Parks' life and include items that recall her childhood, work as a seamstress, and so on. Display students' finished artwork during March for Women's History Month.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Rosa Parks was born Rosa Louise McCauley in Tuskegee, Alabama, in 1913. Her mother, a schoolteacher, taught Rosa to read and instilled in her a lifelong love of books and education. When Rosa was 16, she had to leave school because of family illness—both her mother and grandmother were sick. In 1932, Rosa married Raymond Parks, an activist in the early struggle for African American rights. With Raymond Parks' backing, Rosa went back to school and earned her high school diploma. She also joined her husband in working for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). While employed as a seamstress in a department store, Parks spent her spare time volunteering. In addition to the NAACP, she became active in the Montgomery Voters League. Through her extensive work with these organizations, she came in contact with just about everyone working to advance the cause of black people in Montgomery. By 1955, when she was arrested on the bus for violating the city's segregation laws, Rosa Parks was well-known in the black community. After the historic boycott and the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to end the city's system of bus segregation, Parks moved to Detroit where she went to work for Congressman John Conyers, Jr. She retired in 1988. Parks has been a co-founder of several organizations including the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development, Pathways to Freedom Program, and The Parks Legacy.

Rosa Parks also wrote the introduction to LEE & LOW's *The Bus Ride* by William Miller.

Gregory J. Reed has worked closely with Rosa Parks and was instrumental in archiving and selecting the letters for this book. Reed, an attorney and author of other books, is also a co-founder of The Parks Legacy with Mrs. Parks.

Resources on the Web

Learn more about *Dear Mrs. Parks* at:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/40/pb/dear_mrs_parks_a_dialogue_with_today_s_youth

Book Information

\$10.95, PAPERBACK

ISBN 978-1-880000-61-8

112 pages, 5-1/2 x 8-1/4

Interest Level: Grades 1-5

Reading Level: Grades 2-3

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.7/2.0

Lexile Measure®: 850

Scholastic Reading Counts!™:5.4

Themes: Self-Esteem, Peer Pressure, Civil Rights Movement, Family, Education

Order Information

On the Web:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/ordering.mhtml> (general order information)

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/40/pb/dear_mrs_parks_a_dialogue_with_today_s_youth (secure on-line ordering)

By Phone:

212-779-4400 ext. 25

212-683-1894 fax

By Mail:

Lee & Low Books, 95 Madison Avenue, NY NY 10016

Copyright © 1997-2008 The Active Learner
Lee & Low Books, all rights reserved.
For questions, comments and/or more information
please contact us at general@leeandlow.com