

# *Documentation Binder*

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*Lacey Meek*

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# To Kill a Mockingbird Summary and Reaction

Lacey Meek

Harper Lee's novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is a coming-of-age story, written through the eyes of a young girl and her brother as they experience life in their small town. Life in Maycomb county isn't as dull as it may seem on the surface. Through summer and school, readers watch as young Jean Louise Finch, commonly referred to as Scout, and her brother Jem get into all manners of mischief and learn a little more through each experience. One of the biggest sources of mystery and interest for the children lies on their very own street in the form of a dilapidated old house and its reclusive occupants. This is the home of Arthur "Boo" Radley. Throughout the course of the novel, Boo Radley is a source of curiosity to our young protagonists and multiple attempts to lure him out of hiding come to nothing. However, he is always in the background, a silent presence in their lives.

The story really takes off as the children's father, Atticus, takes on a highly controversial case in which he is defending an African American man who has been falsely accused of rape by a white man and his daughter. Through the course of the story we hear again and again about the trial but as things truly begin to heat up, the children must come to understand the racism in their town and what it means to be African American in their society.

This novel was very interesting to me and I enjoyed it quite a bit. Harper Lee wove her words in such a manner that portrayed the real actions of a protagonist Scout's age, including all events that were relevant to Scout's maturing and keeping the plot in the background before bringing it forward when it was most needed. Her portrayal of the world felt very authentic and covered issues that were very controversial in that time period. This author delved into the intricacies of racism, from the affection that these children feel towards their cook Calpurnia, viewing her not as much an African American woman as a member of their family, to the unfortunate reality that an African American man would not experience a fair trial even against a white man who was viewed as the dirt of society.

I read this story to gain perspective on how African American people have been viewed in society throughout the last hundred years. I wanted to gain an inside look at the views and opinions of this time. I was interested in reading this book in particular because I'd read parts of it before and the writing had intrigued me. It was one of the best choices that I could have made for fiction reading on the subject of racism in America. Throughout the course of the trial, the children struggled with understanding why a man with darker skin would be convicted, even though evidence showed that he was clearly innocent. While Atticus was on the case, Scout and Jem were forced to put up with social pressures in school and in their everyday lives too, with people calling them out on their father's actions and calling him a disgrace. The contrasts between the views of adults and the views of the children were thrown into sharp relief. This was only supplemented by my reading of the book *Through My Eyes*, by Ruby Bridges. In both of these books, it was shown that the disease we call racism is passed on through teaching, and it's not inherent. Children aren't born with bad memories or experiences or views about one another, those are picked up along the way as they grow older. Jem especially was caused a lot of grief by his inability to understand why people would discriminate against Tom Robinson, the accused man, simply because he was African American. A question I gained through reading this book as well as *Through My Eyes* was of how we pick up our cultural values. How much is learned through watching others and how much is learned through what we are taught? Which is the most effective?

*To Kill a Mockingbird* was a wonderful and well written story which allowed me to take a better look into the past, helping to build a foundation for my research on this project as well as prompt new questions that I hadn't considered part of my research in this project. I will gladly add it to my collection so that I may read it again one day.

# Combined Summaries and Reactions to the book *Through my Eyes* and the movie *Ruby Bridges*

Lacey Meek

The book and movie in the following summaries were so similar that I decided at once not to review just one of them, but both. While the book was a very important tool in gaining a firsthand perspective of the events that transpired in young Ruby Bridges's life, the movie was a very accurate representation of that perspective. Together these two sources formed a cohesive whole, each allowing me some insight into the other.

*Through my Eyes* is an autobiography written by Ruby Bridges, the founder of the Ruby Bridges foundation and the primary subject of my research throughout this project. The story was written in large print with captioned photos. It contained quotes about her situation, written by others who witnessed it or heard about it. Often, those who were against racial segregation. The book was written in the format of a children's book, which surprised me when I first picked it up but grew to understand as I read. *Through my Eyes* was written in order to teach children of Ruby's struggle and urge them towards equality and acceptance within in their own lives. The length and format of the book was part of what made me loathe to write a reflection based on it alone. However, her perspective is key in this investigation and when paired with the movie, created a very strong point of reference to be studied in my project.

*Ruby Bridges* is a Disney movie released in 1998 which depicted her book almost down to the last word. Watching this movie was almost like reading the book again and seeing the characters rise up from the pages to stand in front of me. Some of the things Ruby depicted in her book were made far more impact when watching the movie, such as Ruby's father's feelings against her attendance of the once-segregated school and Ruby's teacher's anger when she spoke to the principal about Ruby's isolation from other students when she learned that other children had once again started to come to school.

The book was well written and gave me a far clearer perspective on what it was that Ruby had to experience when attending this new school. The first day she came to school, she passed through an angry crowd shouting obscenities at her and her family. She was made to sit in the principals office with her mother throughout the entire day and watched as angry parents pulled their children out of school when they learned of her presence. The next day, she met her teacher Mrs. Barbara Henry and began regular lessons, the only student in her class and one of two or possibly three in the school that had once held nearly 600. She again had to pass through the crowd both to and from school and was escorted every day by federal marshals when passing in either direction. This was her situation throughout the majority of the school year.

The angry crowds gathered outside of the school caught the attention of a few people, including painter Norman Rockwell and the professor Robert Coles, the latter of whom was a child psychologist who helped Ruby and later wrote a book about her bravery entitled *The Story of Ruby Bridges*. He was shocked by the violence of the rioters and therefore determined to help Ruby, to guide her through the situation. Through his persistence he was able to do so and was a great help to Ruby especially over the course of that first year.

Of course, looking back now when hindsight is always 20/20 I have many issues with the characters in this story, primarily with Ruby's principal. While it was a law that the school could not be segregated, it feels like this woman did everything in her power to continue segregation while still allowing Ruby to attend classes. The first example of this would be when some parents finally started returning their children to school. Despite the fact that these children were in the same grade, they were given a different teacher and kept in a different room. Ruby's teacher had to speak with the

principal and demand that Ruby had time to spend with these children, insisting that keeping her in a different room was still a form of segregation and was therefore breaking federal law. After that, the children would attend Ruby's class for a while each day, and the interaction with other students proved to be a positive experience for her. Another time that the principal's prejudice became evident was when Ruby took an evaluation at the end of the year, assessing her learning. She scored significantly higher than the other children her age and the principal threatened to lower her scores until they were at an area she deemed fit, claiming that the "private tutoring" Ruby received being the only student in her class gave her an unfair advantage.

While looking at these resources I was also able to answer some of the key questions of my research. The first of these questions was why did William Frantz Public School choose to end its segregation? The answer is simple: That they were required to by federal law. There were already requirements made in the past that called for the end of school segregation but this was the first time that that law was enforced. Although one could hope for a more noble reasoning, it still opened a window for the future which may not have been opened for years otherwise.

Another question that was answered by my research materials was of what decision or thought process lead Ruby and her parents to have her attend this school? I learned through the book that only her mother wished for Ruby to attend. After having taken a sort of aptitude test with many other African American children her age, Ruby placed highest. Her parents were approached by officials from the NAACP about being part of a select group of students to be integrated into what were once all-white schools. No mention was made to the fact that Ruby would be the only African American child to be integrated into William Frantz. Ruby's mother was for this idea. She wanted to give Ruby the best possible education available and help to make a beginning to the end of racial segregation. Ruby's father, a war veteran, had plenty of experience with segregation though even in the army. He didn't want to expose Ruby to the sort of violence that attending this new school would bring about. However, eventually Ruby's mother convinced him to let her try and therefore Ruby began attending William Frantz, though she was at first the only child in the school and then one of few, taught in a separate classroom.

A third question that these two sources answered was: how did the students react in comparison to how the parents reacted? As mentioned before, Ruby was taught by Mrs. Henry for the majority of the year. Even once a handful of other students began attending once again, she was still kept separate by the principal. When Mrs. Henry learned that there were other students in the school and that Ruby was being kept away from them, she confronted the principal and reminded her that by keeping Ruby apart, they were breaking federal law. The other teacher refused to teach Ruby as well but after Mrs. Henry's confrontation, the students in the other class were allowed to visit Ruby for a period of time each day. At first, some of the children were wary, having been told by their parents to stay away from Ruby. However, as they began to know her better, the students began to play with her and treat her just as they would any other child. As shown by the fact that only a handful of students returned that year, many of the adults weren't nearly so accepting of her presence. It only seems to prove, therefore, that the children who were still young and not yet taught the darkness of racism were far more accepting than their parents.

## Summary and Reaction to the chapter *Or Does it Explode?*

Lacey Meek

The chapter I read from *A People's History of the United States* was *Or Does it Explode?* This was a chapter that focused on the African American civil rights movements throughout the 1900s. This chapter explored the feelings and natures of African Americans during this time period through writings, poetry, orations, and music of the time. It also followed several important events of the such as the church bombings; the riots and peace protests; the slow but eventual integration of schools; the words of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X; and the incarceration of Rosa Parks in addition to other smaller but just as important events. *Or Does it Explode?* explained how each of these situations, writings, and speeches changed the way that the United States handled racism and how it urged our country to change for the better.

This was a very enlightening piece of text because it gave me an overview of how things have changed in our country as well as why they have changed. It gave me a stronger overview of the civil rights movement than I'd had previously and took time to examine to the views of African Americans in the 1900s, supported with quotes from many different people and resources. I was very interested in the way that the author Howard Zinn incorporated poetry and took a deeper look into artistic expressions such as poetry and music through his research. However, it is important to gain two perspectives on a matter simply for depth of knowledge. I don't know how many different biases can be cast upon the entirety of the civil rights movement, but I'm sure that there must be different accounts of each different event that occurred. Having read Zinn's writings on other subjects before leaves me with a certain amount of uncertainty about the biases portrayed in his works and had I the time I would have liked to have read a chapter on the same subject in *A Patriot's History of the United States* in order to gain another perspective.

If I were to change my area of focus now I might look less at Ruby Bridges specifically and instead look more in depth at the art created by African Americans throughout the 1900s. This chapter has made me curious as to the trends and patterns that may be observed if I did so. I would like to know more, such as who were prominent writers and musicians in support of civil rights? Who was against it? Did they ever change perspectives? How did their histories affect their views and how did their views effect the civil rights movement? Studying African American poetry and orations would be a very interesting project in itself.

This related back to the content we have been studying in class about racial segregations and injustices such as were displayed by the Japanese internment camps or the idea of manifest destiny which drove Native Americans out of their lands. In each case there have been many accounts of oppression but they each have been handled in different ways according to the events that took place. Yet still we seem to have reached the same overall destination in each case though there are still prejudices that have not died, no matter what the majority opinion may be. It will be interesting to see just where we are in a year or two. To see how those prejudices have faded or changed. That change is caused by those wish for it. People like Ruby Bridges and people like Rosa Parks, or Martin Luther King. It's those people who have a dream, and who share it with others that create this change. I look forward to seeing where it takes us in the future.

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