

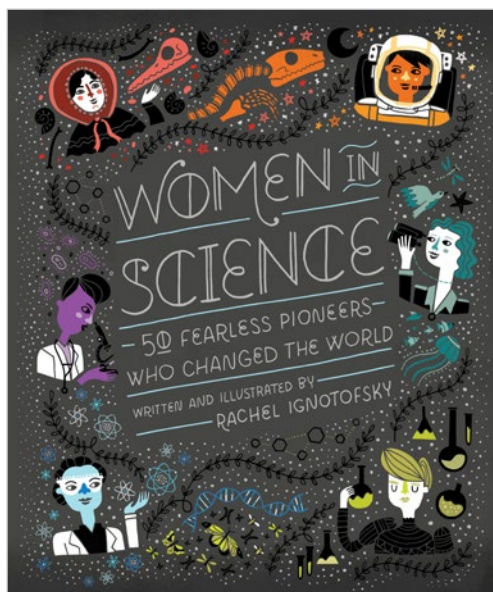
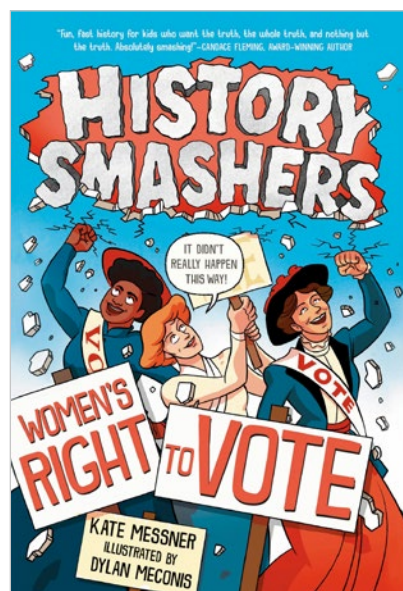
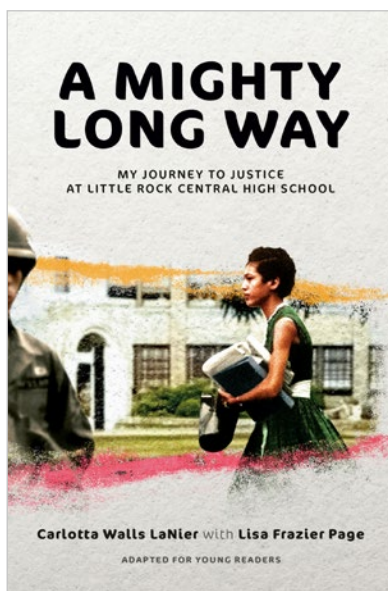
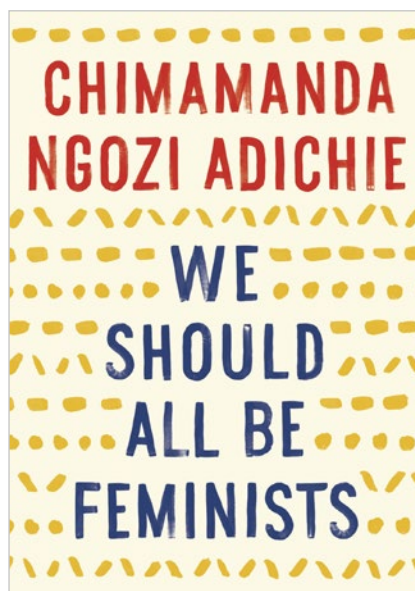


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THEMATIC GUIDE

Teaching Women's History MIDDLE SCHOOL



This guide empowers middle school readers to read, write, and reflect on the remarkable role of women in history and today.

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■ INTRODUCTION

In celebration of Women's History Month 2025, the National Women's History Museum launched a campaign called "[She Is Not a Footnote](#)," aiming to highlight the powerful role women play in America and to foster a vision that leads to action in our schools and society. According to the campaign's research study, students are often told "girls can be anything." But when they look at history books, politics, science, and technology, "they see a world where women are still the exception—not the norm."

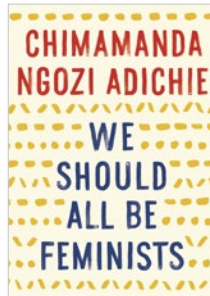
The titles in this collection serve to reverse that perception. By amplifying the stories and achievements of women, the texts empower middle school readers to see themselves as dream chasers, barrier breakers, and changemakers. The guide's activities focus on the following line of inquiry: *What lessons can be learned from groundbreaking women, both past and present?* Teachers can choose one or a combination of titles and strategies from the guide as they ask students to read, write, and reflect on the remarkable role of women in history and today.

■ GUIDING QUESTIONS

The following guiding questions frame some of the big ideas in this text set and can be used for reading, writing, and discussion.

1. What does it mean to be a "feminist"?
2. How does the era we are born into shape ideas, insights, and identities?
3. What are some common characteristics found in inspirational female leaders?
4. How have gender stereotypes and expectations presented barriers to women in history? How have groundbreaking women challenged these barriers and to what outcome?
5. How can we interrupt ingrained bias in society's vision and treatment of women?
6. What challenges have confronted women of color in America, both historically and in contemporary times?
7. How does the concept of intersectionality apply to women's history and social justice?
8. In what ways does poetry provide access to the complexities in our world?

■ ABOUT THE TITLES IN THIS COLLECTION



We Should All Be Feminists

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

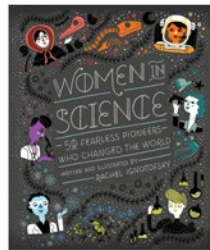
9781101911761

Vintage | Paperback

\$11.00 | 64 pages | Lexile: 940L

Also available: [E-Book](#), [Audio Download](#)

In *We Should All Be Feminists*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie asserts that society is gender-biased by design, and that we can intentionally choose to raise our sons and daughters differently.



Women in Science

50 Fearless Pioneers Who Changed the World

RACHEL IGNOTOFSKY

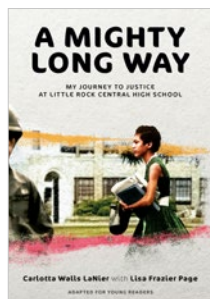
9781607749769

Ten Speed Press | Hardcover

\$16.99 | 128 pages | Lexile: 990L

Also available: [E-Book](#)

Women in Science: 50 Fearless Pioneers Who Changed the World combines biography and art to illuminate the contributions of female scientists who fought for access in a male-dominated field.



A Mighty Long Way

(Adapted for Young Readers):

My Journey to Justice at Little Rock Central High School

CARLOTTA WALLS LANIER and LISA FRAZIER PAGE

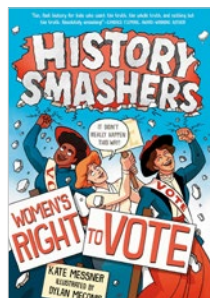
9780593486788

Yearling | Paperback

\$9.99 | 304 pages | Lexile: 980L

Also available: [E-Book](#), [Audio Download](#)

A Mighty Long Way (Adapted for Young Readers) is Carlotta Walls LaNier's personal reflection on the events leading up to the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School, as well as her hopes for the path ahead.



History Smashers

Women's Right to Vote

KATE MESSNER; Illustrated by DYLAN MECONIS

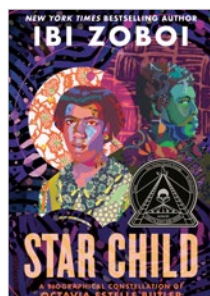
9780593120347

Random House Books for Young Readers | Paperback

\$9.99 | 224 pages | Lexile: 950L

Also available: [E-Book](#), [Audio Download](#)

In a mix of sidebars, graphic panels, photos, illustrations, and more, Kate Messner's *History Smashers: Women's Right to Vote* sets the record straight on the women who fought for the vote and the hard-won victories never to be taken for granted.



Star Child

A Biographical Constellation of Octavia Estelle Butler

IBI ZOBOI

9780399187407

Dutton Books for Young Readers | Hardcover

\$9.99 | 128 pages

Also available: [E-Book](#), [Audio Download](#)

Star Child: A Biographical Constellation of Octavia Estelle Butler is a collection of poems, pictures, essays, and reflections that illuminate the life work of the award-winning author.

■ BUILDING KNOWLEDGE PRIOR TO READING

In order to provide equity and ensure students are ready to read, the following activities build knowledge, provide access, and generate excitement about women's history.

TEST-TO-TEXT PREVIEW

Provide relevance and connection around the study of women's history. Ask students to complete a quick preview of *History Smashers: Women's Right to Vote*, chapter one. Students should note the graphic elements such as interesting images and alternating fonts. Focus student attention on the italicized letter on page 5, where Abigail Adams asks husband John Adams to "remember the ladies" in the Declaration of Independence, and to "be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors." Discuss with the class how the U.S. Constitution did not give women the right to vote, nor did it define women as citizens with equal privileges. For an extended version of Abigail's letter as well as historical background, see prhlink.com/americaninclass.

Next, ask students to read the National Bell Festival's blog entry entitled "We Heard You, Abigail Adams: It's Time to Remember the Ladies," which asserts that "the historical record is dominated by men," and explains how a new national bell will celebrate the achievement of American women (prhlink.com/bellsorg). Ask students to click the link in the article to read more about the U.S. Semiquincentennial Bell, to debut in 2026. Discuss: *How does the committee's decision to select 25 "true visionaries and changemakers" address Abigail Adams's concerns 250 years later? Why has it taken this long?*

SONG ANALYSIS

Promote cultural relevance and connect to big ideas in the texts with a popular song about gender roles and social standards. Possible songs include Queen Latifah's "Ladies First," Kacey Musgraves's "Good Ol' Boys Club," and Taylor Swift's "The Man." Ask students to read the lyrics individually and make note of any words or phrases that support the song's overall message of gender stereotypes and double standards. Next, show students the song's music video with on-screen lyrics. While watching, students should make additional annotations about the performance and how its choreography, costuming, and artistry underscore, extend, or alter their understanding of the song's lyrics. Students can meet in pairs, discuss thinking, and write a short written statement that addresses how the singer uses her art to make a statement. Summaries can be posted on a digital bulletin board such as Padlet.com, where students can provide each other feedback. Discuss with the class how the books in this set address similar issues around gender.

ANTICIPATION GUIDE

In order to activate prior knowledge and generate thinking around significant themes in this text set, challenge students to complete an anticipation guide on

■ BUILDING KNOWLEDGE PRIOR TO READING

women's history. Anticipation guides list true/false statements that encourage reflection and critical thinking prior to reading a text or beginning a unit. Statements can be factual, such as "Susan B. Anthony believed in voting rights for ALL women" (*History Smashers*). Or, statements might be reflective, such as "A male is just as capable of being a feminist as a female" (*We Should All Be Feminists*). The idea is to generate thinking around important ideas that will surface while reading. After reading, students should return to their anticipation guides in order to see if their thinking has changed, and to consider how reading about women's history has extended their point of view. For more on anticipation guides, see prhlink.com/fcghistory.

WORD CLOUD

Use a free word cloud generator such as mentimeter.com/features/word-cloud to activate reflective thinking around the concept of feminism. Write the word "feminist" on the board and give students silent think-time to generate adjectives or adjective phrases describing a feminist. Once students have written their ideas, ask them to post their words and phrases on the digital word cloud generator. Project the resulting word cloud on the whiteboard. Words and phrases used multiple times will appear larger. Discuss the tone of the words that appear. Are some negative, like "angry" or "aggressive"? Are others more positive, such as "advocate for social justice"? Ask students: *Why do you think society sometimes attributes negative qualities to feminists?* Next, flip through the pages of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's essay *We Should All Be Feminists*, modeling how the author presents all the things feminism *is not* before defining what feminism *is*. In her essay, she outlines society's view of feminists as unhappy, unattractive, and intimidating before accurately defining a feminist as "a person who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes" (p. 47). Ask students: *Does this sound like a bad thing to be? Considering this definition, can all genders be feminists?* Post Adichie's definition on a classroom bulletin board or wall so it can serve as a reference while reading the texts in this set.

INTENTIONAL VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

The texts in this set integrate content-specific vocabulary. It may be helpful to provide intentional vocabulary instruction essential for comprehension. Rather than assigning the entire list at one time, pre-teach only the words that will be important in a particular day's lesson. Ask students to note when words are used in the text(s). After reading, students should use the words in speech and writing. Words can be added to the classroom word wall, and students can engage in activities to solidify learning. For example, students can create an illustrated glossary, similar to the one found in *Women in Science* (pp. 118–121). Women's history vocabulary appearing throughout this set includes *abolitionist*, *activist*, *amendment*, *desegregation*, *feminist*, *franchise*, *intersectionality*, *suffrage*, and *zeitgeist*. For more on intentional vocabulary instruction, see prhlink.com/sadlier.

■ ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES DURING READING

The following activities leverage women's history and literature to support students as critical readers, writers, and thinkers.

THE BARBIE CONNECTION: TEXT-TO-TEXT COMPARISON

We Should All Be Feminists is based on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk by the same name. In the TED Talk video (12:15–12:45) (prhlink.com/ytngoizfeminist), Adichie says "We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, 'You can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful, otherwise you will threaten the man.'" Play the clip for students, and ask them to reread the same excerpt from Adichie's text (pp. 27–28). Then show the class the clip from the 2023 movie *Barbie*, where America Ferrara delivers her famous monologue that is remarkably similar to Adichie's essay (prhlink.com/nytbarbie). After students have watched the TED Talk, reread the essay excerpt, and seen the movie clip, discuss: *In what ways does the Barbie monologue echo Adichie's speech/essay? How does it provide relevance, timeliness, and timelessness to Adichie's argument?*

"GEM" AD ANALYSIS

Facilitate an analysis of gender depiction in advertisement by applying the gender equality measure (GEM) framework. Explain to students that "GEM" was created by SeeHer, a group of media, marketing, and entertainment professionals to address and eliminate gender bias in their industry. Their aim is to project realistic, positive portrayals of females in commercials, gaming, and more. To measure consumer perception of how females are portrayed in specific media, the "GEM" asks the following questions:

1. What is the overall opinion of the female presented?
2. Is she portrayed respectfully?
3. Is she depicted inappropriately?
4. Is she seen as a positive role model for women and girls?

Ask students to apply the "GEM" analysis to two recent commercials. First, show the 2025 Superbowl ad and accompanying *NY Post* article featuring influencer Alix Earle for Carl's Jr. (prhlink.com/nypsb). Ask students to turn and talk with a partner, addressing each of the four "GEM" questions. Next, show students the Gatorade ad from the SeeHer ad gallery, featuring basketball player A'ja Wilson (seeher.com/seeher-in-action/ad-gallery/). Again, invite partners to apply and discuss the "GEM" questions.

Afterwards, discuss: *Which ad would receive a higher "GEM" score, and why? Connect to *We Should All Be Feminists* by asking: Which of these ads would Adichie point to as an example of the "male gaze" (p. 40)? According to the *NY Post* article, what about our current culture is reigniting this biased depiction of females in media? Why is the "GEM" tool so important?*

■ ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES DURING READING

TIMELINE

At the end of *History Smashers*, Kate Messner offers “A Women’s Right to Vote Timeline” (pp. 191–196). Ask students to read about recent challenges to these milestones and update the timeline. Assign each half of the class one of the following articles to read and summarize.

- “Supreme Court Tossed Out Heart of Voting Rights Act a Decade Ago, Prompting Wave of New Voting Rules” (prhlink.com/apsave)
- “The Save Act Could Threaten Voting Access for Many Women—And Repeat History” (prhlink.com/timesaveact)

After reading, students can meet with a partner who read a different article to share their summaries and discuss how these legislative efforts have challenged women’s hard-earned right to vote. Together, partners can create an updated, digital timeline using a free tool such as Canva (canva.com/create/infographics/timeline/). Students might choose to add images, similar to the illustrated timeline in *Women in Science* (pp. 114–115). Afterwards, discuss as a class: *In what ways is history repeating itself with women’s right to vote? What specific challenges continue to exist for women of color? What other groups are in danger of disenfranchisement?*

ZEITGEIST ART

In *Star Child*, poet Ibi Zoboi uses poetry to introduce middle school readers to the idea of “zeitgeist,” or “spirit of the times” (pp. 8–10). Deepen students’ understanding of zeitgeist art by playing Billy Joel’s song “We Didn’t Start the Fire.” Provide lyrics and ask students to underline events and references they recognize and circle those they have questions about. Discuss how the song brings the mid-twentieth-century era to life and amplifies the songwriter’s lived experience. Next, read with the class Zoboi’s poem “Zeitgeist,” which illuminates the places, people, and events that framed Octavia’s Butler’s life. Discuss how the poem is similar and different to the Billy Joel song, and how Zoboi devotes one stanza to black musicians, poets, and soldiers. Challenge students to work in pairs and write one stanza of a zeitgeist poem or song about their own era. Encourage students to use Zoboi’s poem as a mentor text by creating a four-line stanza that begins with a place, person, or event that contributes to the spirit of the time. Combine stanzas into one crowdsourced poem and publish it in a shared space such as a bulletin board or website.

IMAGE ANALYSIS

Engage students in an image analysis protocol from *A Mighty Long Way (Adapted for Young Readers)*. In the book, Carlotta Walls LaNier recounts her role as one of the historic Little Rock Nine who in 1957 bravely desegregated an all-white Arkansas high school. Retelling her story does not come without sacrifice. Thirty years later, upon reentering the school, LaNier can almost hear “those vile words bouncing off the walls again . . . (and) the contorted faces of classmates and their

■ ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES DURING READING

snickers and jeers” (introduction). Project on the whiteboard the famous “scream image” portraying Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Little Rock Nine, walking into school amidst jeers from classmates (prhlink.com/histlittlerock). Ask students to apply the Library of Congress’s observe/reflect/question primary source analysis tool to write their initial thoughts before discussing the photograph as a class (prhlink.com/photosandprints). Next, show students the Lyuba Bogan painting *Reflections*, which captures the reflections of the Little Rock Nine fifty years after they famously walked into Little Rock Central High School for the first time (prhlink.com/npslittlerock). Ask students: *How does the painting emphasize LaNier’s reflection in her book’s introduction, where she says “determination, fortitude, and the ability to move the world aren’t reserved for the ‘special people’”?*

“ACE” ANALYSIS

“Nothing says trouble like a woman in pants.” These are the first words in Rachel Ignotofsky’s introduction to *Women in Science*. Ask students: *Why do you think the author begins her book this way?* Discuss the idea of gender norms and expectations, especially in traditionally male-dominated fields. Ask students to pair up, read the rest of Ignotofsky’s introduction, and apply the “ACE” method to analyze the author’s purpose in writing about the historic challenges women have faced in science and in society. In the “ACE” routine, students answer a question, cite text evidence, and explain how the evidence supports their answer. Before reading Ignotofsky’s introduction, post the question students are to answer: “What is the author’s point of view about women in science, and what evidence does she use to support her claim?” After reading and discussing the introductory text, partners should determine that the author’s purpose is to amplify the often hidden roles women have played in science, as well as the challenges they have faced. Students should be able to cite evidence from the introduction that characterizes these female scientists as brave, determined, persistent, and groundbreaking. Challenge students to look for evidence of these traits as they read *Women in Science* and/or the other titles in this set.

SOCIAL IDENTITY WHEEL

The topic of intersectionality is an emergent theme in each of the books in this set. In *History Smashers*, historic activists refer to the challenges of being Black and female as “the double burden” (p. 75). Show students the short video entitled “A People’s Journey: African American Women and the Struggle for Equality” (prhlink.com/youtbe) from the National Museum of History and Culture. In it, scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw explains how she coined the term “intersectionality” using a traffic metaphor about how multiple oppressions manifest themselves in the world. After the video, ask students to complete a “social identity wheel” (prhlink.com/socialidentitywheel). Using this graphic organizer, which does not need to be handed in or shown to anyone else, students consider how their social identity impacts their sense of self and their interactions with others. Afterwards, discuss as a class: *Where do we see intersectionality addressed in Carlotta Walls*

■ ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES DURING READING

LaNier's experience as illustrated in A Mighty Long Way (or in another of our texts)? Where do we see it in current social justice movements, in entertainment, and/or in politics?

POETRY STUDY

In *Star Child*, Ibi Zoboi explains that “the many literary devices in poetry can be used to delve into the twists and turns of history, sink into the many layers of science, and gain greater entry into the depths of a remarkable person’s inner life” (pp. 111–120). Invite students to explore poetry as a vehicle for both comprehension and creativity with one or more of the following activities:

- Analyze the speculative poem “Daughter of Dust” in *Star Child*. Apply the “TPCASTT” analysis protocol by discussing the title (initial impression), a paraphrased summary, connotations, attitude, shifts, title (after reading), and theme. Close out the analysis with a summary statement about the author’s point of view.
- Compose either a shaped or acrostic poem like those on pages 20–22 and 25 of *Star Child*. Consider focusing on a significant female artist, activist, scientist, etc., from current times. Alternatively, choose yourself as the subject.
- Read Octavia Butler’s poetic note to herself on page 94 of *Star Child*. Using the “I am a ...” format she models in the note, write your own goal-setting poem.
- Keep a writer’s notebook like Octavia Butler’s pink notebook in *Star Child*. Capture momentary thoughts, images, words, phrases, and emotions as they occur. Later, use one or more of these entries to initiate a poem.

READ LIKE A WRITER

In *Women in Science*, the “About the Author” section explains how Rachel Ignotofsky “has a passion for taking dense information and making it fun and accessible” (p. 125). Ask students to select one of the illustrated biographies in her book and, using the “See/Think/Wonder” analysis protocol, analyze how the author makes complex material understandable. Students should see how significant facts appear separately from the main text, and are highlighted with vivid illustrations.

Students might then think how this format allows them to read short excerpts first, building interest prior to reading the longer text. Readers might wonder if the separate quotations that appear in each biography are another factor in creating relevance and connection. After students have read one of Ignotofsky’s excerpts “like a writer,” challenge them to write one of their own, modeled after her format and focused on a contemporary female scientist, activist, politician, athlete, or other notable figure. Alternatively, students can research a scientific, historic, or other informational topic and, like Ignotofsky, create a fun and accessible one-pager.

■ ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES DURING READING

CARTOON ANALYSIS

In *History Smashers*, Kate Messner asserts that “cartooning was an important part of the woman suffrage movement in the 1900s” (p. 103). Project one of these historic cartoons on the board, such as the 1919 image of Lady Justice and a kneeling, handcuffed woman appealing to Uncle Sam (prhlink.com/fineartamerica). Ask students to analyze and connect to the cartoon using the “See/Think/Me/We” routine (prhlink.com/seethinkmewe). In this protocol, students observe the image, consider preliminary thoughts, and make connections to their own lives before reflecting on the image’s application to the “bigger picture.” After students have analyzed the cartoon individually or in partners, discuss with the class: *How does this early twentieth-century cartoon speak to contemporary politics, social justice, or other concerns?* Discussion might include current legislation impeding women’s voting, health, or other issues.

■ CULMINATING ACTIVITIES AFTER READING

SILENT CONVERSATION

In *Star Child*, *A Mighty Long Way*, and *Women in Science*, a prevailing theme is that representation matters. Facilitate a silent conversation around this theme that encourages think-time, equity of voice, and reflection. Before the “conversation” begins, ask students to fold a piece of paper into half and then half again, resulting in four equal quadrants. Next, post on the whiteboard the Marian Wright Edelman quote “You can’t be what you can’t see,” and ask students to write it in the center of their foldable. Explain that students will hold a small-group silent discussion reflecting on the quote’s meaning in the text(s) as well as in society in general. Students should start the conversation by writing their name and their response to the prompt in the top, left-hand quadrant. Next, they should pass the foldable to another group member, who will read and respond to their classmate’s thinking in a new quadrant, using text evidence and contemporary connections. Foldables continue to get passed, and new responses written (along with student names) until all students in the small group have added their thoughts. Group members are not restricted to responding only to the original writer; they can respond to the foldable’s owner, to another groupmate, or to the original prompt. Directional arrows can indicate to what or whom students are responding. Finally, the original owner reads all posts and writes an “I used to think/Now I think” synthesis on the backside, impacted by classmates’ contributions. Discuss: *How does the text(s) and our lived experience support the significance of representation in sports, in media, in politics, in entertainment, in activism, and in society?*

FISHBOWL DISCUSSION

Provide students an opportunity to be both contributors and listeners. Fishbowl discussions (prhlink.com/fishbowl) are especially effective for discussing complex topics like gender and racial bias, social justice, and recent efforts to

■ CULMINATING ACTIVITIES AFTER READING

remove women's earned rights in health, politics, and other venues. As students read specific excerpts from one or more of the books, ask them to generate open-ended questions that will promote an engaging, text-based class discussion. Questions can be generated individually, in partners, or in small groups, and can be submitted either digitally or on index cards. Student-generated questions from this set might include: *Why are schools becoming segregated again (A Mighty Long Way)? How far have we actually come in securing ALL women the right to vote (History Smashers).* Collect the questions and set up the room for a fishbowl discussion, where one group sits in an inner circle, surrounded by the rest of the class in an outer circle. Students in the fishbowl address one student-generated question at a time, using the text and their own knowledge and experience as evidence for their reasoning. Meanwhile, students in the outer circle take notes on speakers' participation and thinking in order to provide feedback. After 10-15 minutes, the circles flip, and observers move into the fishbowl. At the end of the activity, ask students to reflect on the discussion: *How did we do? What steps can we take next time to make sure all voices are heard? How can we ensure our discussion is text-based and reflective of critical reading and thinking?*

CULMINATING WRITING ASSESSMENT

Culminating assessment prompts provide students with a frame to read and analyze the texts in a collection and prepare students for formal writing opportunities that occur at the end of the unit. Students should be introduced to these prompts prior to reading so that they read with a purpose. Prompts should be complex enough to encourage critical thinking and to promote a variety of student responses. Students can apply thinking from annotations, activities, and class materials as they respond to the prompt. The prompt might align with an essential question such as the ones at the beginning of this guide. For example, students might respond to the following prompt:

In multiple examples of women's history texts, writers reflect on the need to challenge prevailing gender/racial roles and expectations. Using A Mighty Long Way or another of the texts we've read in this unit, compose a well-written essay that analyzes how authors convey the necessity of "good trouble" through purposefully chosen examples, illustrations, and writing. Use explicit text evidence to support your thesis.

■ ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources provide additional information and ideas for engaging students in women's history.

- *Choices in Little Rock*
prhlink.com/fhlittlerock
- "How to Talk to Kids about Gender Equality and Stereotypes"
prhlink.com/unwomen
- National Women's History Museum: Digital Classroom Resources
prhlink.com/womenshistoryorg
- "Remembering Octavia Butler"
prhlink.com/ytbutler
- Teaching Resources for Women's History and Women's Rights
prhlink.com/educationblogs
- Women's History Month for the Classroom
prhlink.com/neaorg
- Women's History Toolkit
prhlink.com/natwmnhstalliance
- Women in Science
prhlink.com/worldwildlife

■ ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

Laura Reis Mayer is a professional learning consultant from Asheville, NC. She develops content and facilitates learning for national education organizations. A twice-renewed National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT), she taught middle school, high school, and college English, speech, drama, and literacy. She has written more than forty teacher guides for multiple publishers.

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