

Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families Study Guide

Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families by J. Anthony Lukas

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Contents

Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	4
Chapters 1-2.....	5
Chapters 3-4.....	6
Chapters 5-6.....	7
Chapter 7-8.....	8
Chapters 9-10.....	9
Chapters 11-12.....	10
Chapter 13-14.....	11
Chapter 15-16.....	12
Chapter 17-18.....	13
Chapter 19-20.....	14
Chapter 21-22.....	15
Chapter 23-24.....	16
Chapter 25-26.....	17
Chapter 27-28.....	18
Chapter 29 - Epilogue.....	19
Characters.....	20
Objects/Places.....	23
Themes.....	25
Style.....	27
Quotes.....	29
Topics for Discussion.....	31



Plot Summary

Common Ground by J. Anthony Lukas is a book that follows the lives of three families in Boston during the turbulent period of the 1970s. The book shows how they coped with the problems created by mandatory busing and the effects it had on the students and the lives of the families. It also shows first hand the lives of the people in the various Boston neighborhoods as well as giving a lot of history including that of the different Boston neighborhoods.

The books begins with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the immediate effects of the assassination. Colin Diver, who was graduating from Law School, had already accepted a position with a prestigious Washington DC law firm. Like others, he was re-evaluating his position due to the Vietnam War and the King assassination. However both he and his wife Joan felt a commitment to social action. This made him opt out of the establishment. He accepted a position with the mayor's office at half the salary to work on problems of social justice.

Rachel Twymon is a single black mother living on welfare. She has seven children that she is raising alone. A serious health problem keeps her from working for long. She is very upset by the King assassination because her children are roving the streets with the crowds and she tries to keep them at home. Mandatory busing creates more problems for her children. Her children are assigned to different schools as a result of mandatory busing. All she can do is to urge them to avoid trouble.

Alice McGoff is also a single mother. She is white and poor and lives in a housing project in Charlestown. The mandatory busing affected her children. She deals with the issue by putting her three youngest children in Catholic schools. The older children attend Charlestown High School that receives bused children.

Common Ground looks at how these families coped with these issues in addition to everyday life. Each of them is in a different financial position but has to confront the same issues in different ways. Each of them deals with the situation in the best ways they can.

The book is full of history. It describes the history and the development of the different Boston neighborhoods and traces the different family lines.

Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary and Analysis

The book opens with Colin Diver finishing his last year at Harvard Law School. He is an editor for the Harvard Law Review which would open doors to the best jobs and opportunities for him, but he isn't sure that he wants to be a member of the establishment given the war the nation is involved in. He managed to avoid the draft by his status as a student, husband and father and by the time of his 1968 graduation, many law school graduates were avoiding the establishment. He had accepted a position with a major Washington DC law firm and was having second doubts about it.

Diver was also very affected by the assassination of Martin Luther King and the following riots. He and Joan listened to the reports of the riots and violence. Colin attended some of the demonstrations and meetings and became interested in social issues.

Chapter Two opens with people in the Roxbury Orchard Park housing project reacting to the news of the King assassination. Rachel Twymon was notified by the police that her store was being vandalized. Her clothing store had grates across the glass so she decided to spend the night at the store. She knew her sons George and Richard, known as Sly and Snake, were out in the crowds.

The next morning, Rachel tried opening her store but was forced to close by the crowds. She didn't know that four of her sons were in the crowds, roaming and looting. The situation settled down after a few days.

Rachel had first met King when she was fifteen and she was very impressed with him. She and her brother Arnold Walker disagreed about the effects of the King assassination.



Chapters 3-4

Chapters 3-4 Summary and Analysis

Alice McGoff works at the Charlestown Navy Yard Officers Club. Even though she was white, she supported Martin Luther King's movement but became sceptical when he came to the north. She, husband Danny and their seven children live in the Bunker Hill housing project. Alice feels that the poor Irish had it as bad as the blacks but they chose the route of politics instead of violence and protests.

Alice's father, Bernie Kirk, had not been a Kennedy supporter, even though Joseph P. Kennedy and his family had their roots in the district. He felt that the Kennedy's turned their backs on the Irish people when they moved to the suburbs. It was the district where Jack Kennedy first ran for Congress and won. Bernie supported his opponent, Cotter.

Alice was a Kennedy supporter since Charlestown was loyal to the Kennedys, although they differed over his position on civil rights.

Chapter Four is a chapter about Diver and opens with the mayor of Boston being informed about the King assassination. He is informed about the outbreaks of violence. They took the approach of letting the black leaders try to quiet the community instead of using the police. Mayor Kevin White and his aide Barney Frank spent most of the night trying to quiet the situation.

Boston Gardens cancelled the James Brown concert for that evening and the mayor's aides felt that it would result in more violence. They had the concert reinstated and televised, hoping that young people would stay home to watch it. The city had to guarantee the gate and White tapped a group of business people known as the Vault for money. They spent some of the money on concerts and activities for the black and other communities.

Ralph Hoaglund, founder of CVS, and others worked for an organization called FUND to raise money and improve conditions in the black community. Mayor White spoke at Harvard Law School. Colin Diver and his friend David Mann were impressed by the speech. They met with Barney Frank to discuss the possibility of working with the city. Colin accepted a job as an assistant to the mayor, cancelling his job offer from Washington.



Chapters 5-6

Chapters 5-6 Summary and Analysis

The Jenkins were a slave family that migrated to Nova Scotia with their owners. When their master-servant relationship ended, their son Frederick moved to Roxbury for employment. He married and had a daughter Helen. At this time, a young black girl named Fanny, was kidnapped, taken to Augusta, Georgia and sold to the Greshams. She eventually married Jack Bennefield. They were freed after the Civil War and remained working for the Greshams for pay. They had a daughter Cornelia who married Frederick Walker and had nine children. Their third oldest daughter, Fanny, migrated to Boston in 1923. Her brother Thomas Quinnie married Helen Jenkins and they had a daughter named Rachel, along with seven other children. They settled in Lower Roxbury.

The marriage of Helen and Quinnie slowly deteriorated. The family knew Quinnie had many women. Rachel was very rebellious. Helen eventually left Quinnie who died in February 1963. Their daughter Rachel moved out of the house at the age of nineteen and had two sons before marrying Heywood Twymon. She had four children by him. They eventually separated with her having him jailed several times for non-support.

Chapter Six describes the heritage of Alice McGoff back to Ireland, where a small clan of Kirks. Owen Kirk moved to Roodstown in 1801 and married Cath Creaton. They had five children. Their oldest son Bryan married Bridget and had five children. Their son Patrick immigrated to Boston and married Mary Quinn. When Mary and their daughter dies, he was left with four year old Bernard. They returned to Ireland and then back to Boston in 1890. Patrick died soon after their arrival. Barney married Catherine Sharkey in 1893 and moved to Charlestown. They eventually had five children. One of the sons was Bernie Kirk who married Gertrude Wolfberg. Alice was their child.



Chapter 7-8

Chapter 7-8 Summary and Analysis

Dr. John McKechnie quit his physician's practice in Greenock, Scotland to migrate to Boston in 1755. From Boston, he went to Maine. He married Mary North. They eventually settled in Winslow where he became the third largest landowner in town. Their third oldest son, Joseph, married Electa Bement. His farming provided for the nine children they had. They eventually moved to the frontier on the banks of the Penobscot fifteen miles north of Bangor. He and his sons, Charles, moved back to central Maine to farm and married Elizabeth Hale. They had five sons, the oldest of whom, Hiram, moved to Boston in 1854. Hiram changed the spelling of his name to Makechine and opened a men's clothing store with a friend. It failed within three years. His brother George arrived in 1871 and eventually married Sarah Ann Cram and they had five children. Their son Charles married Mabel Downing and had a son named George. Charles died in 1907. George went on to receive a masters in education and married Anne Schonland and had three children. Their daughter Joan, attended Wheaton College and married Colin Diver.

The Divers were of Irish descent. Ben Diver, Colin's grandfather, had been born in County Donegal but immigrated to London. He married Sarah. Their son Ben moved to Canada and then to Boston. He married Ethleen Heuser, a lawyer. Ben worked at MIT's photo lab. They settled in Lexington and had on son, Colin.

Chapter Eight has Rachel Twymon becoming involved in the problems at the Gibson school, which her children attend. She didn't really want to become involved in anything racial. When a teacher sympathetic to their cause was fired, Rachel became more active. When the parents staged a sit-in at the school, Rachel joined the demonstration outside. The children changed schools when they moved to the subsidized Orchard Park project. Conditions at the Dearborn school were worse than at Gibson. Eventually, she sent her younger children to St. Patrick's school, where they received a better education. Rachel also kept them from attending all black high schools, sending them to a school in East Boston.



Chapters 9-10

Chapters 9-10 Summary and Analysis

The chapter begins with a graduation ceremony at Cambell Junior High School. The speaker is Louise Day Hicks and there is a great deal of opposition to her and her views. Louise was from the area and had degrees in education and law. She first ran for the Boston School Committee in spring of 1961 and became the committee chairman the following year. Louise wanted to carry on her father, the judge's work, for the people of the community. In spite of this, she was a known bigot and was dealing with the issue of segregation in Boston schools. She claimed that Boston schools were not segregated. The result was a school boycott and the situatuion was an embarassment to the Kennedy administration.

As a result of Louise and the School Committee's refusal to acknowledge the existence of de facto segregation, black organizations accused her of racism and opposed her re-election. A state study showed that there was racial imbalance in the schools. The Boston School Committee rejected the report. In 1965, de facto segregation was outlawed in Massachusetts.

Louis ran for other public offices but never won.

Chapter Ten is about the McGoffs. During Alice's childhood, gangs formed in Charlestown. Her brothers belonged to different gangs. Danny McGoff moved into the Bunker Hill project when it first opened when he was six years old. The family had to move when his father died. He married Alice and had seven children and worked as a bartender. They eventually moved into the Bunker Hill projects. Danny secured a public works job to support his growing family. After Danny's death in 1972, Alice had seven young children to support. When the Navy Yard closed, Alice lost her income.

Her son Danny belonged to the Green Store gang which was becoming more involved with acts of violence.

Chapters 11-12

Chapters 11-12 Summary and Analysis

Colin plays softball for the team of the city administration. While driving through the South End, he notices the children of different ethnicities playing with one another. He is impressed with the South End area. Even though he worked for the Boston mayor, he lived in the suburbs. He finally moves across the city line to the Brighton area. They begin to look to buy a house in the South End area, which had once been the nation's largest rooming house district. The area had passed through various stages in its development over the years from being a wealthy area, to a slum to being revitalized. People were now buying buildings and renovating them. The area was the target of urban renewal and redevelopment in the 1960s and was now desirable for young professionals.

Just as the Divers were about to give up their search in the South End, they found the house they wanted. Colin worked on the house after work.

Chapter Twelve opens with Rachel Twymon at a performance of Hello Dolly. After the performance, Rachel couldn't find a taxi that would take her to Roxbury. She decides to move out of the Orchard Park project. In August 1967, she secured an SBA loan and purchased the clothing store where she worked. The store closed the following year and Rachel became active in church activities. Her church was building an apartment complex in the South End. She and her family moved in June 1971 to Methunion Manor. Unfortunately there were plumbing and heating problems. Rachel helped found a committee to deal with tenant grievances. The project ran out of money in 1972.



Chapter 13-14

Chapter 13-14 Summary and Analysis

Colin has the title of assistant to the mayor but actually works for Sam Merrick. He works on federal funding and actually has little contact with the mayor that first year. Colin works on various projects like the airport noise in East Boston, the opposition to expressway building in Jamaica Plain, and rent control. He is learning a lot about politics. He learns that the mayor is not really interested in governing Boston but instead wants to use his role as a stepping stone to other positions. Colin is more interested in Boston's success.

As the mayor's aides depart for other positions, Colin takes over more responsibilities. He formulates the city's position for the B-BURG investigation. His expectations of what government can and cannot do in the area of social justice has changed. He remains an activist and soon resigns from the mayor's office. Colin becomes the assistant secretary in the state's Secretary of Consumer Affairs division in October 1971 and then becomes the Secretary of Administration and Finance. He also works on the school integration problem.

Chapter Fourteen is about Judge Arthur Garrity, the judge assigned to the civil rights Morgan versus Hennigan case. He has grown up in the Swedish Green Hill area and is a Kennedy campaign worker. He becomes a United States Attorney in the Kennedy administration and is a judge on July 6, 1966.

Garrity begins hearing the civil rights case in 1972. His decision is released on June 21, 1974 and he rules that segregation in Boston is intentional. The government then has to devise an acceptable remedy to the situation. While this is being worked on, Garrity is subject to many physical threats and social ostracism. They formulate a program which allows students to attend neighborhood schools or any of the city's magnet schools. Mandatory busing is involved.



Chapter 15-16

Chapter 15-16 Summary and Analysis

On September 8, 1975, Alice McGoff wakes up to the sounds of helicopters. This is the first day of busing and Alice did not like the idea. She enrolls three of her children in Catholic schools to avoid busing and let the older children make up their own minds as to whether or not they want to attend school that day. Lisa and Billy decide to attend classes at their high school. Danny McGoff, who has graduated, watches from a corner with brothers Tommy and Kevin as they enter the school. They join the crowd even though Alice urges them to stay home.

The situation in Boston is tense and Senator Ted Kennedy appears in Charlestown where he faces deep resentment. Alice begins to attend meetings to fight the busing, believing in King's approach of non-violence. The community succeeds in keeping Charlestown High School from being a magnet school in 1975. Lisa McGoff is on a committee involved in the deliberations.

On the second day of school, Alice takes part in a prayer march to oppose busing. Danny tries to get his mother out of the demonstration, but she refuses. They survive a brief skirmish with police.

In Chapter Sixteen, Cassandra Twymon is assigned to be bused to Brighton High along with her brother Wayne. They have little trouble during their first year. The following year, Cassandra and sister Rachel are assigned to Charlestown. Their mother Rachel attends meeting and sees the amount of hatred but there is nothing she can do but help her girls survive the year.

Cassandra's first day of school is uneventful. Many students either boycott or stay away for fear of violence. The same is true of young Rachel's children as the girls tell their families of their first day. Their mother warns them to stay out of trouble. Eventually Cassandra and other black students protest the abuse they are subject to. They stage a boycott by refusing to get off of the bus. They are returned to the Y where they hold a meeting. On October 25, Frank Power, the principal, resigns. On January 22, white students stage a sit in and the minority students have to be led from the school under police protection.

Chapter 17-18

Chapter 17-18 Summary and Analysis

Billy McGoff is active in Project 76 at Charlestown High. It results in a class trip to Boston, England. The trip is cancelled at the beginning of senior year because a teacher responsible for holding the funds loses the money gambling. Since this fact is not publicized, the students believe the reason is busing.

When Bob Murphy becomes Headmaster of Charlestown High on October 24, 1975, he makes it clear to white students that they are not going to force the blacks out. He will enforce the court order. Skirmishes between whites and blacks continue with boycotts by both sides. There are problems when blacks qualified for sports teams. Some of the white players quit.

Boston has planned many bicentennial activities, many of which have anti-busing demonstrations taking place. By the end of the year, the quality of education became the primary issue at stake. Lisa McGoff is one of the leaders. They hold the January 22 sit-in, which results in some skirmishes bringing the police in. Lisa McGoff joins the sit-in. Six students are arrested the following Monday when they refuse to leave their classrooms. Lisa is determined to be arrested but leaves the building instead. On April 15, the student meet with the Mayor and try to meet with Judge Garrity. One the way, some of the Townies attack a black lawyer called Ted Landsmark who appears at a press conference saying blacks are not safe in Boston.

In Chapter Eighteen, Joan Diver finds her son Bradford assigned to a Lower Roxbury school more than a mile away. Brad has already been attending a racially mixed school. Colin is no longer working for the state. Many parents of Bancroft students, including the Divers, mobilize together to fight the school assignments. This results in Bancroft students, including Brad, being allowed to remain at their school. Joan becomes actively involved with social service philanthropy organizations.



Chapter 19-20

Chapter 19-20 Summary and Analysis

Alice McGoff is working as an operator at the New England Telephone Company. Alice participates in a demonstration in front of the telephone company president's, Mercer's house. He is also the United Way chairman and the organization has contributed money to finance busing. She refuses to donate to the United Way and urges her co-workers to do the same and make their donations to the charity of their choice.

Alice continues to participate in prayer marches with the women cajoling various clerics to pray with them. When the Cardinal makes some comments regarding his safety in South Boston, it causes an uproar. The Cardinal apologizes and meets with the Charlestown delegation.

Chapter Twenty is a chapter about the Cardinal who hails from Texas, although he grew up in the Fall River, Massachusetts area. His appointment stuns the Boston diocese. He follows Richard Cardinal Cushing. Cushing is close to the Kennedy clan and receives a great deal of financial aid from them. Cushing is a member of the Kiernan Commission, which decided that Boston schools are racially imbalanced and his Archdiocese has supported the black community.

Medeiros has done a great deal for the underprivileged in Texas and hopes to do the same in Boston. He is not as close to the politicians as Cushing is or as popular in the neighborhoods of Boston.

Chapter 21-22

Chapter 21-22 Summary and Analysis

Rachel's church starts a Black Economic Development Program and proposes a shopping center of black-owned businesses on the first floor of the Methunion Manor. But the management keeps rejecting applicants. Since Methunion defaults on its payments, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) begin pressuring them to rent the commercial space. The project is foreclosed on and David Dretler is appointed as receiver in bankruptcy. He offers Rachel a job in the office, which she accepts.

The commercial space is returned to Head Start and a Soul Center, which was a record store, arcade and barbecue joint. Crime increases in the area. Rachel's son Richard joins a gang and is active in robbing people. He is never arrested. His younger brother George is arrested and placed on probation. Thirteen-year-old Little Rachel becomes pregnant. The baby is born on April 1975 and placed for adoption.

In Chapter Twenty-Two, Colin and Joan are walking home from the theater one night when they are accosted by a young black man. They make it home safely but Colin begins to wonder if the South End is where he wants them to live. The neighborhood has changed and there are now various low-income projects and prostitutes work in the alleys where the children played.

Chapter 23-24

Chapter 23-24 Summary and Analysis

The Powder Keg group renews the tradition of town meetings in Charlestown in 1974. Alice McGoff regularly attends these meetings. She has no grudges against blacks but opposes forced integration. The group is not comfortable with their treatment by City Hall, the courts, and the police so they began contacting their congressmen.

Alice takes time off from her phone company job to attend a demonstration in Washington DC. Lisa goes with her. Attendance is thin because of heavy rain. They are disappointed in the results of their meeting with Tip O'Neill. They attend a vote on an anti-busing amendment, which does not pass.

Alice cannot afford to move to the suburbs like some of her family and friends end up doing. They are also not as interested in the busing issue as she is and do not even want to discuss it at gatherings.

Chapter Twenty-Four is about the editor of the Boston Globe. On October 7, 1974, several shots are fired into the newspaper company's building. A second attack on the Globe's property follows soon after. They did not know who did the shooting but suspect anti-busing forces. New security procedures are implemented. The editor of the paper is Tim Winship. On October 9, the front page story reveals the rape of a white girl by five black juveniles. It is unusual for the paper to report a rape on page one and there is disagreement among the staff. Black reporters want more input into the decision-making process and are not working until their demands are met. Their demands are finally met.

The Globe is basically the paper of the working class and has always supported the blacks. This costs the paper some readers even though they try to provide balanced coverage.



Chapter 25-26

Chapter 25-26 Summary and Analysis

Rachel's sister Alva manages to obtain the education she needs to get a good job as a computer operator. Both she and her husband work two jobs and begin to look to buy a house. They buy a house in the Dorchester section of Boston. As soon as they move in, whites begin throwing rocks through the windows, telling them to move out. They finally call the press. They are told they had crossed the invisible line.

The invisible line is made by Washington Street, which more or less bisects Dorchester. It is a part of the B-BURG legacy. Blacks and whites begin crossing this line in both directions and the situation is aggravated by busing. Alva and Otis Debnam are unaware of this when they buy their house.

Some of Alva's neighbors see the television interview. They belong to an organization called RUN or Racial Unity Now and come to the couple's assistance. At one of the meetings, a group of whites tell the Debnams that they are going to burn their house. An undercover police officer is in the crowd and calls for reinforcements when fighting breaks out. RUN has pictures of the men and Alva files a report with the FBI. Two of the men, Stephen Mulrey and William J. Flaherty are arrested and charged. The case is sent to mediation.

Meanwhile the attacks continue. The police are not much help and Alva quits her second job to stay home with their three children at night. When mediation fails, both Mulrey and Flaherty have the charges dropped in Superior Court. Violence continues in the area culminating in a violent confrontation on July 4 when a white gang steals part of the Debnam's picket fence. Only Tommy Walker is found guilty and imprisoned.

Chapter Twenty-Six has Lisa McGoff receiving threatening phone calls in March 1976. She is having nightmares of the April 5 attack on Ted Landsmark at the City Hall demonstration. She has decided not to return to Charlestown High for her senior year and spends a week at an adventure-challenge camp in New Hampshire where she befriends black students from Roxbury. She changes her mind and returned to Charlestown High and becomes very active in school activities. She is determined to avoid any racial conflict.

There are fewer racial problems at the school but the whites and blacks remain separate. Lisa is accepted at BunkerHill Community College.



Chapter27-28

Chapter27-28 Summary and Analysis

Cassandra Twymon is uncomfortable at Charlestown High. Her teachers feel that she is not working up to her potential but find it difficult to motivate her. Within a few weeks, both Cassandra and Rachel pack a suitcase and leave home. Both move into apartments with friends but come to the July 4 party at Alva's. Alva picks up Rachel and returns both girls to their mother. Since Rachel would not change her strict rule, the girls leave with Alva. The next day Rachel's son Frederick is arrested and sentenced to two and half years in Concord Prison. He is paroled on May 7, 1976, eight months later.

He returns to live at Rachel's and holds a series of short jobs. Rachel institutes legal action to have Cassandra and Rachel placed in a home by the Department of Public Welfare. The girls remain in Alva's custody. Rachel's welfare payments are adjusted and eventually reach Alva. Soon Cassandra and Little Rachel are skipping school and staying with their boyfriends. They cause trouble with Alva's family. Cassandra moves out of Alva's house and Alva tells the case worker that she does not want either of the girls.

One day Cassandra goes to Rachel's apartment and Little Rachel answers the door. The girls move in with their mother and Cassaandra receives her degree from Chalestown High. The younger son Wayne enters the police academy.

Chapter Twenty-Eight is about Mayor Kevin White. When McGovern receives the Democratic Presidential nomination, White is told he is on a short list for the vice-presidential spot. A few hours later, McGovern calls to offer him the spot. Later, after finding out that Kennedy does not agree with the choice, McGovern retracts the offer. This strains White's relationship with the Kennedy family.

White returns to Boston to deal with problems. In the mid-1970s his aides groom him for a run for president until Garrity's busing decision. White has always tried to avoid the school issue.



Chapter 29 - Epilogue

Chapter 29 - Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Judge Garrity and his wife move to a townhouse a block away from the Divers. His townhouse is robbed and there are a variety of crimes in the area. They ask for increased police presence and officers sit in front of the houses of two judges. When the area protests too much, there is a burst of traffic tickets in their area.

Joan Diver becomes active in the fight against crime, finally writing a letter to Mayor White. Police patrols increase and arrests are made.

The Divers are also unhappy with the situation at the Bancroft School. The school district boundaries are changed and the school is overcrowded. They entertain the notion of leaving the South End. They begin to look at houses. They decide to bid on a house in Newton Corner. When their bid is accepted, they tell their friends and put their house up on the market.

The Epilogue reveals the status of the various characters in the book after the story ends.



Characters

Rachel Twymon

Rachel Twymon is the mother of six children and owns a clothing shop in Roxbury. Rachel is descended from two slave families, the Jenkins and the Walkers, who came to Boston for employment opportunities. Her father is Thomas Quinnie Walker and her mother is Helen Jenkins. Rachel has been rebellious as a child and attends the Brandeis Vocational High School. She has to quit and find a job before graduation to help with the family bills. She leaves home at the age of nineteen and has two sons, Richard and George by truck driver Eddie Jones. In 1957, she marries Sergeant Heywood Twymon. Rachel has four children with him. She works as a day worker to help support the family since Heywood is a heavy drinker. They eventually separate and Rachel soon moves to her parent's house where she remains until she legally separates from Heywood and begins receiving public assistance. Heywood is sentenced to prison several times for non-support. The children are placed in foster care for several years when Rachel is ill. In August 1967, she purchases the clothing store where she works using an SBA loan. The store closes the following year. She continues to live in Methmanor and goes to work as a medical assistant at MIT.

Colin Diver

Colin Diver is a student at Harvard University Law School as the book opens. His mother Ethleen is a lawyer. Colin completes his undergraduate work at Amherst. He is elected to Harvard Law Review after his first year. Colin is married to Joan and becomes interested in social issues while in college. It is the time of the Vietnam War and the King assassination. Colin is impressed by a speech given by the mayor of Boston and changes his plans to work for a prestigious Washington D.C. law firm. He accepts a position to work as an assistant to the mayor of Boston for half the money. Colin and Joan have grown up in the same Boston neighborhood. They live in the suburbs while Colin worked for the city but eventually purchase a house in the South End area. Colin does the renovation work himself over a period of several years. After three years at the mayor's office, he goes to work for the state's Consumer Affairs Office and then becomes Secretary of Administration and Finance. He eventually leaves state employment. Colin and Joan have two sons, Brad and Ned. Colin eventually leaves the public sector to teach at Boston University. They decide to move from the South End and buy a house in Newton Corner. Both Divers remain at their jobs.

Alice McGoff

Alice McGoff works at the Officers Club at the Charlestown Navy Yard. She is married to Danny and lives in the Bunker Hill housing project. They have seven children. The McGoffs are poor Irish. Alice is the third of five children born to Bernie and Gertrude Kirk



and grows up as a tomboy. She marries Danny McGoff in September 1957 and has seven children in the next six years. He has a difficult time supporting his family. Alice begins to work to help support their family. Danny dies in 1972, leaving Alice with seven kids under the age of fourteen. The boys become members of various gangs. She is opposed to busing and takes part in demonstrations in Charlestown. She continues to work for the telephone company and lives with her three youngest children in Charlestown.

Louise Day Hicks

Louise Day Hicks is born in Boston. Her father was a judge and her mother died when she is sixteen. She marries John J. Hicks. She works as a clerk in her father's law office. Louise drops out of Boston College Law School before finishing but eventually completes both her education and law degrees, in spite of having two sons. She is chairwoman of the Boston School Committee.

Arthur Garrity

Arthur Garrity is a judge in Boston. He attends Harvard Law School, works as an assistant United States Attorney, and then enters private practice. He marries Barbara Anne Mullins, a friend of Rose Fitzgerald. Garrity presides in the Boston School segregation case and rules that segregation in Boston schools is intentional. He eventually moves to a South End townhouse.

Alva Walker Debnam

Alva Walker Debnam is the sister of Rachel Twymon. She and husband Otis work two jobs each and save to buy a house in Dorchester in a white neighborhood. They are subject to rock throwing and violence. Their son Tommy is sentenced to prison and Alva and Otis eventually separate. Alva and the children eventually move to a different area.

Kevin White

Kevin White is the mayor of Boston. He is married to Kathryn and has five children. He has served as a state representative and senator, the Boston School Committee, City Council, and other positions. Kevin graduates from Boston College Law School. After announcing he will not run for a fifth term, he takes a teaching position at Boston University.

Joan Diver

Joan Diver is the wife of Colin. She attends Wheaton College and is from the same area of Boston as Colin is. They have two sons, Bradford and Ned. Joan works for a



philanthropic association and is very active in the community. She remains at her position with the Hyams Trust.

Tim Winship

Tim Winship is the editor of the Boston Globe. He is a Harvard graduate and a World War II combat correspondent. After the war, he begins as a reporter at the Washington Post. He becomes editor of the Globe in 1965. He retires on January 1, 1985 to teach at Columbia University.

Cardinal Humberto Sousa Medeiros

Cardinal Humberto Sousa Medeiros is the Cardinal of Boston. He is originally from Massachusetts although he served in Texas. He succeeds Richard Cardinal Cushing. He dies on September 17, 1983 after heart surgery.



Objects/Places

Cambridge, Massachusetts

Cambridge, Massachusetts is the location of Harvard University. It is a suburb of Boston.

Roxbury

Roxbury is a slum area in the inner city of Boston.

Charlestown

Charlestown is an area of Boston where the Bunker Hill housing project is located.

Lexington

Lexington is a Boston suburb where Colin Diver grew up.

The South End

The South End is a Boston neighborhood located near the downtown area.

Brighton

Brighton is a northwest area of Boston located near the city line.

The Back Bay

The Back Bay is an area of Boston located along the Charles River, directly across from Cambridge.

Washington DC

Washington DC is the nation's capitol and the site of a rally that Alice attended.

Dorchester

Dorchester is an area of Boston located southeast of Roxbury.

Newton Corner

Newton Corner is a Boston suburb located near Cambridge.



Themes

Beliefs

One of the underlying themes of the book is acting according to beliefs. This is a turbulent period in United States history. The civil rights movement is underway as well as the Vietnam War. This is also the period of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Many people are reevaluating their values, like Colin Diver does. He has already accepted a position with a prestigious Washington DC law firm. But he, like other people, has doubts about joining the establishment. He and his wife Joan are both concerned with social justice and the inequities and injustices they saw in the society around them. Colin eventually obtains a job working for the mayor of Boston so he could work on social issues, canceling his job with the Washington law firm. He works on school integration and the busing issue. Joan works for a philanthropic organization. They move their family from the suburbs to the racially mixed South End neighborhood of Boston where they worked to establish the Bancroft School with its open education approach. They believe that living in the South End is consistent with their beliefs about social justice. When the neighborhood becomes too dangerous and they decide to move to the suburbs, they question their beliefs. Colin decide that he is right to put the safety of his family ahead of their views on social justice.

Fear

Another theme of the book is fear. Fear can be stated or unstated. There is a lot of fear caused by the issue of mandatory busing and forced integration. The fear manifested itself as anger and hatred but it is basically the result of underlying fear. The students and parents did not know what to expect. This is indicated by statements such as busing will mean that the three R's will come to mean riot, rape, and robbery. This is a statement based on ignorance when busing was opposed strictly on racial grounds. Since blacks and whites did not socialize or have much contact with one another, the people did not know what to expect or how to behave. Their fear made them too tangled up in the issue to see clearly. This is especially evident in Lisa McGoff who spent so much time fighting and protesting busing at Charlestown High that she almost quit high school rather than face another year. A week at a racially mixed camp in New Hampshire changes her perspective however. She decides to return to Charlestown High and make it the best year possible but staying away from any racial conflict. She loses some of her fear and prejudice from the week at the New Hampshire camp with a group of blacks from Roxbury.

Coping

Coping is a third theme of the novel. Each of the people have to make decisions and cope with the situation of mandatory busing. Since it is court-ordered, there is nothing



they could do to change it and they have to find a way to cope with it. They all attend meetings and some join or found organizations. Many people like Alice McGoff become proactive. Lisa McGoff spent so much time fighting busing at Charlestown High that it emotionally drains her and she makes her decision not to return for her senior year. She cannot cope with another year. Her week at summer camp makes her change her perspective. It makes her determined to avoid the racial conflicts and have the best senior year possible, which she does. Rachel Twymon cannot do nothing but counsel her children to stay out of trouble. She cannot afford to send her younger ones to Catholic school like Alice McGoff did. Cassandra Twymon copes by becoming isolated and running away from home. She spends part of her senior year living with friends or her aunt. The Divers successfully fight the busing of Brad and others from Bancroft and then find the school's district changes which destroys the open education policy of the school. They cope by moving to the suburbs.



Style

Perspective

Common Ground is written from the third-person perspective with the author, J. Anthon Lukas acting as narrator. This approach allows the author to provide the reader with all of the background information that is required for a book of this type and Lukas does a very good job in this respect. He carefully selects the three families because he felt that each one of them is representative of and stands out in their own social context. He wants to show the realities of life in the inner city during this turbulent period in United States history. What kind of problems do these people face and how do they deal with them?

Many of the problems these people faced and dealt with are unknown to those who lived in the suburbs. Lukas chooses the three families he will concentrate on and interviews the various people. This is how he constructs the dialogue presented in the book. He does a great deal of research which he discusses in the Acknowledgments section. The reader has to appreciate the writer's style presentation and depth of his research. He is thorough in his approach and presentation of the material and does an excellent job of presenting the realities of life in the city. The author is a journalist and college professor. He is well qualified to write a book of this type.

Tone

The book is written in an objective and academic style that can be expected from a journalist and academic scholar. Lukas presents the facts without any of his own views and opinions. He allows each of the characters to speak for themselves. They express their own views and opinions because they are real people who have their own views and opinions about the issues of mandatory busing and forced integration. They are the people who had to cope with the problems. But Lukas is never judgmental in any way. He reports the facts and the dialogue as it was reported to him. Busing and integration are emotional subjects and it would have been easy for Lukas to interject his own views or opinions but he does not force his own views on the reader. This makes the book more digestible for the reader and allows the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. Since there is no one forcing views on the reader, this makes the subject matter and the characters quite real for the reader. The objectivity and the depth of the author's research add to the reality of the story and allow the author to impart the realities of life in the city as experienced by the Divers, the McGoffs, and the Twymons.

Structure

Common Ground is a lengthy book of almost seven hundred pages. The book is divided into twenty-nine chapters and an Epilogue. Each chapter is devoted to either the Divers, McGoffs, or Twymons and the book jumps back and forth between the three families.



Interspersed in between are chapters on The Chairwoman, The Judge, The Cardinal, The Editor, and The Major. The chapters not only present the lineage of the families as well as the facts and background of the various characters, but also the historical background and development of the different Boston neighborhoods. The Epilogue is basically a list of all of the characters and what happened to them after the end of the book.

There is a map of the Boston city area with insert enlargements of various neighborhoods like Charleston. This is very helpful to the reader who is not familiar with the Boston area. There is also a Table of Contents at the beginning and an Acknowledgments section at the end. This section gives all of the resources used by the author in writing the book. It is divided into sections based on the kind of resources. There is also a detailed Index which allows the reader to easily look up information. The only aspect potentially missing from the book are pictures which would have allowed the reader to associate a name with a face.

The chosen structure works well for the book. The book is easy to manage and provides an enjoyable reading experience for the reader.



Quotes

"The trouble was, Colin didn't know whether he wanted to join such an establishment, one which had drawn the country into a terrible war, stirring dissent across the land that spring." (Chapter 1, pg. 4.)

"The difference between the blacks and the Irish, she thought, was that the blacks had tried to advance through the civil rights movement - sit-ins, marches, demonstrations, ultimately riots - while the Irish had used politics. Alice believed in politics - it was the American way of getting ahead. And for a long while it had paid off." (Chapter 3, pg. 22.)

"But if Charlestown had become an industrial slum, at least it was an Irish slum. By the turn of the century it was Boston's most Irish neighborhood." (Chapter 6, pg. 79.)

"For more than two centuries - down to Joan Diver in contemporary Boston - the MeKechnies would feel they were following in that noble tradition." (Chapter 7, pg. 86.)

"Politics required that she cater to the anxieties of the Irish who had been left behind in South Boston, Charlestown, Dorchester, and Jamaica Plain, but she could never quite bring herself to play the strident demagogue. As the mood of racial confrontation deepened, Louise looked on with distaste and some measure of private misgiving, while the movement she had nurtured and exploited over the years, but which she could no longer control, swept the city closer and closer to the brink." (Chapter 9, pg. 138.)

"Yet here, five months after Martin Luther King's assasssination, blacks and whites were throwing baseballs, not rocks, at each other. It was exactly the kind of racial harmony which Colin was trying to foster in his work for the Mayor." (Chapter pg. 161.)

"All that summer, he brooded over the book, wondering whether government was making things better or worse in Boston. And yet he clung to values which had brought him to City Hall in the first place. what had changed were not his beliefs but his expectations." (Chapter 13, pg. 213.)

"To Alice, the idea of sending her children to a school halfway a across the city when they had a perfectly good school right across the street was utterly ridiculous. Moreover, what she knew of conditions in Roxbury strengthened her resolve not to put any of her children on a bus." (Chapter 15, pg. 259.)

"But Garrity had given that year's seniors the option of graduating from their present schools, and the class had remained overwhelmingly white, whereas the freshmen, sophomores, and juniors were substantially integrated. This - plus their two years of aborted labor on Project '76 - had lent the 204 white seniors a special sense of mission: they were the last graduates of the real Charlestown High and, by God, they were going down fighting." (Chapter 17, pg. 302.)



"Indeed, the telephone company had put pressure on its own employees to support the fund drive, but Alice had flatly refused to contribute and she had urged her co-workers to boycott as well, spreading the word through a letter to the Charlestown Patriot. "I will not give any of my hard-earned monies to an organization that is so dramatically opposed to my beliefs. I would like to suggest to my fellow Townies that they make their contributions directly to the organizations of their choice." (Chapter 19, pg 352-353.)

"Columbus Avenue had become a no-man's-land, he realized - a frontier between two embattled communities whose interests were increasingly pitted against each other. For the first time, Colin began to wonder whether he really wanted to raise his family in the heart of a war zone." (Chapter 22, pg. 427.)

"But even Tom's rhetoric made Alice uncomfortable; it smacked too much of a personal animosity toward blacks that she didn't share. Adamantly opposed to forced integration, she never regarded herself as personally prejudiced to forced integration, she never regarded herself as personally prejudiced against blacks - after all, she'd lived side by side with them in the housing project for years." (Chapter 23, pg. 456.)

"Well," said Armstrong, "the neighbors seemed to feel they'd moved into white territory, that they had crossed an invisible line." (Chapter 25, pg. 512.)

"If ever a man was bred for politics it was Kevin White, the product of a remarkable union in which two diverse strains of Boston history were uneasily woven." (Chapter 28, pg. 586.)

"Colin conceded that, of late, he was paying less attention to the needs of society and more to his own, his wife's and his children's. Not long ago he would have apologized for that; now he saw no reason to. What was wrong with wanting to live in a community where he could walk the streets without fear, where he could leave his family at home without worrying about their safety, where he could send his children to public school with confidence that they were getting a sound education?" (Chapter 29, pg. 648.)

Topics for Discussion

Discuss the effects of the Martin Luther King assassination on the Divers, McGoffs and Twymons?

What were the issues surrounding Louise Day Hicks? Was she really a bigot? Discuss this using examples from the chapter to support your position.

How did Rachel Twymon and Alice McGoff differ in their views regarding mandatory busing? How did each one handle the situation?

What problems did mandatory busing present in the Boston area? Does it seem logical to assign students to different schools each year? Why or why not?

What problems did Alva and Otis have when they purchased a house in Dorchester? What is the invisible line?

Why did Lisa McGoff change her attitude about her senior year at Charlestown High? What was the result?

Why did the Divers move from the South End? Did they sell out when they left the inner city?