Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues Short Guide

Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues by Harriette Gillem Robinet

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Contents

Overview

One week of the Montgomery bus boycott is depicted by showing how it affected Alfa Merryfield and his family. An impoverished African-American youth, Alfa works to provide rent money and food for his sister and great-grandmother. When they are unfairly accused of stealing money from a white family, Alfa seeks to clear their names. He is also determined to find the person who has been stealing the monthly rent payment from his home. Worried that his family will be evicted and hungry, Alfa logically figures out who took the rent money and proves that his family members are not thieves.

About the Author

Inspired by family stories, Harriette Gillem Robinet presents African-American history in fictional narratives. Born on July 14, 1931, in Washington D.C., Robinet is the daughter of teachers Richard Avitus and Martha (Gray) Gillem. She grew up in Virginia. Her family is Roman Catholic. During summers, she played at Arlington, Virginia, where her paternal grandfather had been a slave on Robert E. Lee's plantation.

Robinet's great-aunt Anice told her about experiencing both suffering and happiness as a slave and how she and other slaves enjoyed outsmarting whites. These oral histories later shaped Robinet's fiction.

As a child, Robinet was affected by segregation which caused her to suffer unjust circumstances and humiliation. She rode in the back of buses, being forced off if she did not quickly give her seat to a white passenger. She was harassed at public libraries and for riding her bicycle through a white neighborhood on a shortcut to her home during a rain storm. A photograph of a Virginia lynching profoundly affected her.

These events also had a great influence on Robinet's development as a writer.

After graduating with honors from Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., Robinet enrolled at the College of New Rochelle in New York. Her educational history is quite different from many other children's authors. By 1953, she completed a bachelor's degree majoring in microbiology. That field was her academic focus while pursuing graduate courses at the Catholic University of America, finishing a master's of science degree in 1957 and a doctor of philosophy five years later. After Robinet earned her first university degree, she was employed for one year as a bacteriologist at the Washington, D.C., Children's Hospital. She then worked as a medical bacteriologist at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center through 1957.

From 1957 to 1958, Robinet was a biology instructor at Xavier University in New Orleans, Louisiana, where guards prevented her from browsing the stacks at the city library. She had to ride buses seated behind a screen that said "Colored," carrying the screen with her if she had to move back to the rear seats to accommodate white passengers. She became acutely aware of segregation in the Deep South at that time when traveling on staff trips in Louisiana and Mississippi. Robinet also listened to stories her students shared about growing up black and southern as well as their parents' and grandparents' experiences. She collected local folklore and history which later benefited her fiction in the form of factual details which made her characters and settings compelling. When she resumed her schooling in Washington, D.C., Robinet became a research bacteriologist at Walter Reed.

Harriette Gillem married McLouis Joseph Robinet on August 6, 1960, and the couple moved to Oak Park, Illinois, a Chicago suburb. She worked as a civilian food bacteriologist with the United States Army Quartermaster Corps for two years. Her husband was a health physicist at the Argonne National Laboratory. They have six

children. Robinet identifies herself politically as a Democrat. An avid flower enthusiast, she belongs to the American Orchid Society.

Robinet was always interested in writing. Her first children's book, fay and the Marigold, was published in 1976. Because one of her sons has cerebral palsy, Robinet decided to write this story about handicapped children. Four years later, her second children's book, Ride the Red Cycle, was printed. She worked on a manuscript for an adult science fiction novel, Microbes of Gold.

In the 1990s, Robinet began to publish novels for young adult readers.

Her fiction tends to be historical, featuring mostly African Americans, and emphasizing the themes of freedom and emancipation. Fire and war are frequent symbols in her books to represent the conflict, abrupt change, and metamorphoses her characters experience. Many of her books have plots based on a mystery. Robinet strives to humanize history. Her fiction is both entertaining and instructive although it sometimes seems didactic. In addition to her books, Robinet has also published magazine articles and she is a member of several writing organizations, including the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, Mystery Writers of America, and Sisters in Crime. She has also presented writing workshops at the Illinois Book Fair.

Robinet has received recognition for her work. She was honored with the Notable Books in Social Studies Award, the 1991 Friends of American Writers Young Peoples Literature Award, the Carl Sandburg Award, and the Society of Midland Authors' 1998 Award for Children's Literature. Her 1998 book, Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule won the Scott O'Dell Historical Fiction Award. Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues was nominated for a 2001 Edgar Allan Poe Award sponsored by the Mystery Writers of America for best juvenile mystery.

Prior to writing Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues, Robinet traveled to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1997 to research local history and culture. She timed her trip to coincide with the same June week in which her characters unravel the mystery concerning their missing money and prove they had not stolen from their employers. A stickler for accuracy, Robinet wanted to experience similar climatic conditions that her characters would have endured and to have a familiarity with the setting which she would fictionalize. Even though modern Montgomery has expanded with new buildings and housing developments and older neighborhoods have been renovated, Robinet could imagine what the city's basic infrastructure was like during the bus boycott in order to create Alfa's world.

Setting

Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues is set in Montgomery, Alabama, during late June 1956, six months after Rosa Parks's arrest.

Settings within the city offer contrasts of shelter, inclusion, exclusion, love versus danger, and hate with some places harboring elements of both good and bad or exhibiting them in varying degrees. Ironically, Montgomery is where both the Civil War and Civil Rights Movement had significant beginnings. In 1861, that city was the first Confederate capitol where politicians approved some of the first orders approving military action against federal troops. Alfa refers to places in the city where slaves were sold.

Almost one hundred years later, Rosa Parks refused to give her bus seat to a white passenger and was arrested. This was the catalyst for social protest and legal action by other African Americans in Montgomery who had previously taken a stand against injustices and racial inequality. The bus boycott in Montgomery gave black leaders a voice to organize a community-shared mission which seized national attention about the plight of blacks in the segregated South. Ministers were among the most prominent leaders, including a young Martin Luther King, Jr., who preached nonviolence as a means to seek humanitarian social reform.

The Merryfield's home is located in Sundown, an African-American community, near downtown Montgomery. They live in a two-room, tar-paper shack which has no electricity or plumbing. The four glassless windows are covered with "greased brown paper." The monthly rent is fifty dollars payable to their landlord Mr. Harris. Various places in the shack's walls or in objects such as a picture frame serve as hiding places for that money. The family has few belongings. Alfa treasures his flashlight which illuminates things he is reading or places he is searching. Sometimes he has to use it to get Big Mama's attention by shining it on his face so that she recognizes him.

When the weather is warm and clear, the Merryfields bathe with water from a faucet at a neighbor's house. If it is cold or stormy, they bring water inside. They use an outhouse. Usually Alfa can bring food home from the grocery store where he works, but, when he cannot, he and his sister root through dumpsters to find edible scraps.

Nearby woods provide Alfa a private place to think and read and a place to collect sticks for the wood-burning stove.

The neighboring houses are much nicer than the shack and have electricity, plumbing, gas stoves, four rooms, and porches.

Alfa acknowledges that people tolerate his tacky dwelling because they respect and value his great-grandmother, saying "Our tar-paper house embarrassed the street, but the neighbors loved Mama Merryfield."

Twenty houses, ten per side, fill his block.

Neighbors raise gardens and chickens, and pleasant cooking smells waft through the neighborhood. Alfa plays kick the can with neighborhood children in a "brick-red Alabama dirt" field. He walks the streets to go to work and to look for his great-grandmother who often becomes disoriented and lost because she is unfamiliar with routes due to relying on bus drivers to know directions. Robinet depicts Sundown as a hot, dusty, weedy, cluttered, somewhat lethargic place with puddles and populated by mosquitoes and stray dogs.

In contrast, the white neighborhoods are described as having sizeable houses and yards. Unlike Sundown, though, the white neighborhoods are hostile, intolerant, and unfriendly spaces for blacks. When Alfa attempts to make a delivery to a customer, Mrs. Logan, whose address he cannot decipher from the piece of paper he has been given, he is threatened, called obscenities, and accused of looking for trouble. At the Williams's thirty-room, yellow mansion where Alfa goes with his great-grandmother and sister to clean to earn enough rent money, he is amazed by the opulence. Mrs. Williams imports foreign trees and has native trees removed to plant the new ones.

She also has costly exotic flowers. The spacious mansion lacks the love, compassion, and unity found in the Merryfield's tiny shack. The $2,000 she accuses the Merryfields of stealing seems immense compared to their $10 salary for extensive house cleaning.

When he is not at home, Alfa spends most of his time at Greendale Grocery. Alfa keeps the store orderly, arranging cans so that labels face forward at the same angle and items are color coordinated. He unloads produce from trucks to stock the store.

During his breaks, Alfa studies anatomy and biology textbooks that he keeps in the storage room. The grocery store is nurturing because it provides Alfa money and food for his family. The store, however, can be a negative environment because Alfa is afraid he will accidentally slice open bags of flour when he cuts open boxes and has nightmares in which that happens and Mr. Greendale shouts, "Look, Alfred's white now!" He is also stressed by Mr. Greendale's antagonistic attitude toward him, making racist remarks and unfair comments about Alfa's work performance.

The Holt Street Baptist Church is a nucleus of comfort and hope for the Merryfields.

At church, they are surrounded by people who welcome and care about them and seek the same goals. The church is crowded by people who are polite and respectful towards each other. Mama Merryfield is guided inside, while Alfa sits near an open window and listens to hymns and prayers broadcasted over loudspeakers. Like a pep rally, church leaders, featuring real ministers Reverend Martin Luther King., Jr., and Reverend Ralph Abernathy, tell the congregation about discussions with city and bus officials and outlines African American demands for equitable transportation based on "first come, first served" and legal efforts to change the segregated system. These speeches boost people's spirits, and they respond with cheers and applause. Alfa gets "goose bumps"

when he realizes that Montgomery's boycott could stop bus segregation throughout the United States. The church fills him with pride and optimism.

Other settings are inhospitable to Alfa.

At Dr. William's office, Alfa is disappointed when Dr. Williams rudely dismisses him. A nurse, however, provides Alfa some crucial information about the Williams's financial woes. This altercation between Alfa and Dr.

Williams has to be especially frustrating because of Alfa's interest in medicine and aspiration to become a physician. Dr. Williams and his office are not going to provide Alfa any assistance or mentoring to encourage him and help make his dreams come true. The white attendant at the gas station is threatening to Alfa who quickly leaves after obtaining a clue about Mrs. Williams's brother, Paul Adams. The pawnshop also is hazardous territory where the proprietor alerts Alfa that he is unwelcome. Alfa is careful on the streets of Montgomery, aware that he could get in trouble if anyone perceived he was dawdling or looking at whites in ways they thought were inappropriate.

Alfa's sister Zinnia boldly drinks from a "whites only" fountain and makes loud remarks about water from the "colored" fountain not having color. Alfa steps off the sidewalk when white people are approaching and avoids their eyes. These details help readers picture the realities of segregation and how settings were altered to force obedience. Alfa's estimates of how long it takes to walk to each place reveals not only the distances between places, but also the separation of people based on racial attitudes.

Alfa fears the police station which fills him with dread. He knows that black males often did not survive interrogations by the police. Alfa bravely goes to the station as summoned and waits on a "hard wooden bench" that "smelled of sweat and pee."

He sits at the end of a ten-foot-long wooden table "full of dents and pits, as if people had hammered on it" in a "stuffy inner room."

Officer Newton sits at the other end and lets Alfa present his story. This interrogation is an epiphany for Alfa who pieces together clues as he speaks and realizes who the thief in the Williams's house is. Alfa's second visit to the police station is more pleasant because he talks with Officer Newton in a "small, air-conditioned room" in which a "red geranium bloomed on the windowsill."

The lighted room represents Alfa being able to convince Officer Newton of his evidence, even though the policeman says he will not press charges against Mrs. Williams. Also, Officer Newton gives Alfa sufficient money to pay rent and tells him that his family will be exonerated of theft and Mama Merryfield will receive Social Security payments that should cover future rent expenses.

When he asks about getting Social Security for Big Mama, Alfa goes to the library because Officer Newton said that was where his children went to find information. Instead of learning about Social Security, Alfa gains a lesson in whom to trust. Guards

club Alfa while he tells them that Officer Newton sent him. He realizes that he should ask African Americans whether he should go someplace instead of trusting whites.

Alfa renews his spirit at a park-like place on the Alabama River which he dips his fingers into because "Flowing waters always soothed me." Robinet locates this site near factual places such as Union Station and Tallapoosa and Commerce Streets. Alfa passes through a tunnel beneath a railroad bridge, suggesting rebirth and freedom like that gained by runaway slaves using the Underground Railroad. Alfa's realization based on Mama Merryfield's information that cotton used to be shipped from that site to England shows their awareness of the world and broader and possibly more tolerant settings than Montgomery. The park also brings Alfa despair when he sees a homeless man. Alfa worries about his future and questions his aspirations.

Because the characters are faithful to the bus boycott, no bus is depicted as a setting.

Readers only see the outside of buses empty except for a few white passengers and blacks who are white children's nannies who ride buses only to transport those children. Bus interiors are never described because the characters never ride them. Alfa only once rides in a car during the week featured because an African American offers him a ride.

Social Sensitivity

Robinet is acutely aware of social injustices which she presents in Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues. Her African-American characters experience inequitable treatment and seek improvement not only for themselves but for all people. Racism is the most serious social issue in this novel. Although some whites sympathetic to blacks' plight assist them in minor ways or verbally support them, most whites are depicted as contributing to the problem of segregation.

Alfa refers to the "white establishment" and "system" that attempt to prevent him from pursuing his dreams and securing sufficient resources to advance beyond his marginal lifestyle.

While trying to resolve his concerns about rent money and public respect for his family, Alfa becomes aware that whites also have personal and economic problems. Even though Alfa tends to be empathetic, he often withholds understanding for whites because "I had discovered that they paid for what was important to them." Hard work and thrift are depicted as virtues.

Family is celebrated in this novel and sustains individuals despite uncontrollable obstacles and interferences that try to impede and intimidate them. The African-American community is depicted as supportive and loving, accepting its members and providing what comforts they can. Robinet's characters seek to make friends not enemies. The federal government's issuance of Social Security shows another means of community support and recognition of wage earners of all races.

Thoroughly dedicated to the boycott and his people, Alfa walks and seeks to right injustices because he wants to "break these chains pulling our Merryfield family down."

His acts of civil disobedience are intended to improve society as a whole not break it down. In contrast, Alfa's mother abandons her children and is addicted to drugs and gambling. She tries to disintegrate the family and community structure and has no respect for Big Mama. Homelessness and the ruthlessness of some landlords who charge expensive rental fees for deteriorating properties which they refuse to repair are also social issues this novel broaches.

All of the Merryfields' earnings are needed to cover the rent each month. Often, their employers delay payment of salaries, not pay them at all, or fire them for no valid reasons.

The Merryfields' walking emphasizes their conviction and idealism that individuals can make a difference. Their kindnesses, compassion, and humanitarian spirit demonstrate the values of tolerance, forgiveness, and nonviolence to society. They survive a variety of social abuses and persevere, retaining their sense of humor, to insure that personal dignity is preserved and that truth and freedom prevail.

Literary Qualities

Robinet lets Alfa tell his story. This first person narrative enables readers to experience Alfa's dilemmas and successes and empathize with him and his family. Robinet's historical research and personal awareness of segregation contribute to the authenticity of her text. While Alfa and most characters are fictional, they are acting in a setting that is real. She occasionally uses real words from speeches for dialogue and lyrics from hymns that became Civil Rights anthems.

Robinet stresses the importance of novels like Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues because, "I believe that if we don't know our history, we're sometimes tricked into repeating the worst of it." She does not spare readers by sugarcoating reality to make it more palatable. Instead, she presents the extremes of poverty and elitism of that place and era.

Drama and humor intertwine to enhance suspense and relieve tension.

Her characters are believable because of the details she provides about their desires, frustrations, and interests to develop their characters. Robinet vividly describes the southern landscape with magnolia and crepe myrtle trees. True to southern traditions, white characters are addressed by the courtesy titles Miss, Mrs., and Mr., as well as "Sir" and "Ma'am." Alfa and Zinnia also use such titles for black adults. When whites address Big Mama as Aunt Lydia, that is their way to demonstrate their respect and affection for her. Names convey deeper meanings. Merryfield refers to the family's optimism and efforts to seek joy even in despair and might allude to their slave heritage when their ancestors toiled in cotton fields. Sundown represents the AfricanAmerican community whose day begins when they can rejoin their families after work and school. That name might also refer to the dusk color of its inhabitants and symbolize that the boycott was nearing its successful end.

Robinet uses figurative language effectively to make Alfa's world vivid and dynamic. His church is "packed fuller than a bag full of mothballs." When he hears the ministers' speeches, Alfa says "you could slice the hope like juicy peaches." Alfa refers to situations with figures of speech based on his grocery experiences such as grocery figurative language "mixing the apples and the oranges" and "mixed the lemons and limes." He differentiates between "small beans" and "big beans" troubles. Alfa says that "Anger bubbled up inside like red beans at a boil." When Zinnia criticizes one of his plans, Alfa states she "soured my cream." He compares his problem-resolution method with stocking the grocery, saying "I set cans of the story on neat shelves in my mind. All the labels were facing out." This final sentence indicates that Alfa knows the identity of the thief.

Nature uplifts Alfa's mood because "Moonlight was silken" and "birds were calling, insects were chirping, and tree frogs were whistling." Bird imagery emphasizes African Americans' desire to fly above their woes on the ground. Alfa's injured leg, wounded twice by the bullies and library guards, is a literary device that Robinet has used in other

books to show that characters can rise above impediments and use their brains not their brawn to resolve problems.

She often uses music, such as Alfa's invented "a bad case of rent money blues," in her books to express spirituality, joy, and determination.

Racial references include Alfa's comment that "Now I was going to suffer because of my little white lie," suggesting that type of deceit was not as severe like Mrs. Williams's theft was ignored. This sentence also suggests that perhaps Alfa should not have attempted to conceal the truth because of his race. The dog Tramp, whose leg Alfa saws off, is "black-and-white," hinting of racial harmony. Religious imagery is consistent throughout the text with Alfa declaring "I was a church-going boy" and singing spirituals. God's name and prayer are often invoked. Alfa could be considered a Christ figure undergoing trials and a metaphorical crucifixion and resurrection. Church services resemble revivals, trying to save the souls not only of people but of Montgomery. Alfa makes religious allusions to early Christians and their tormentors such as saying, "Why challenge the lions when you're out of the arena?"

Colloquial speech patterns enhance Robinet's storytelling and characterization of southern African Americans, especially the phrasing "It be" and Big Mama's statement, "I shake the dust from my feet."

Racist characters use offensive terms when speaking to blacks, emphasizing their disrespect and disdain for African Americans.

The use of "y'all" seems jarring at times because most southerners use that contraction plurally to indicate two or more people, and Robinet's characters say "y'all" when addressing one person. Also, Alfa refers to neo-Nazis which seems like a modern intrusion. In the 1950s, blacks in Montgomery probably would have alluded to someone having ties to the Ku Klux Klan or white supremacists and not Nazism or groups associated with skinheads and hate groups that gained public attention in the late twentieth century. Robinet refers to moving south to Birmingham from Montgomery. Montgomery is approximately onehundred miles south of Birmingham.

Themes and Characters

Truth is the major theme of Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues. Twelve-year-old Alfa Merryfield is the protagonist who seeks to solve a mystery while bolstering his sense of pride in himself and his family. Named Alpha by his mother, which represents the first Greek letter, his name was often misspelled as Alfa which he accepted because he thought it was odd "being a second child named first." Ironically, Alfa's correct name truly identifies his role. Keenly aware that he is the man of the house, Alfa feels responsible to earn money to pay for necessities or pawn treasured belongings to insure that his great-grandmother and sister will not become homeless. He is intelligent, resourceful, curious, and creative. Like his great-grandmother, Alfa is tall, resulting in people assuming he is older than he actually is. His maturity enables him to plan his future and pursue his ambitions to become a doctor, stressing that "I was a scientist" when explaining his approach to comprehending life. He initiated finding, applying for, and securing his job at the grocery. Alfa wears a bow tie and tries to stay neat to present a professional image.

Alfa values education and considers it the means to escape poverty and become autonomous and free from oppression. He relies on the scientific method to solve the mysteries which confront him. His desire to learn is a theme throughout the book as Alfa develops his own intellect by studying books and gains knowledge from his experiences and the wisdom of his great-grandmother, sister, and other trusted adults such as his teacher. Alfa displays a variety of behaviors depending with whom he is interacting. He is sometimes submissive and cooperative to appease racist whites in order to avoid punishment and possible injury. Alone, he is independent and persistent. With his sister and friends, Alfa explores his surroundings and is assertive.

Embracing nonviolence, Alfa aspires to emulate Martin Luther King, Jr.'s ability to respond peacefully and not hatefully to white supremacy. He writes and sings "the Alabamy bus-rider blues," altering the lyrics to express he has "a bad case of rent money blues." Alfa frets that his family will be unable to pay their rent which is due in a few days. Someone has been taking the hard-earned money he and his sister and great-grandmother earn from their hiding places. Although emotional nurturing is ample at home and within the AfricanAmerican community, the availability of food and sustenance are ever present concerns. The Merryfields often patch together meals from various food sources and work at diverse tasks only to earn low wages.

Uncertainty and worry are themes that Robinet develops. Alfa despairs that the family is unable to use banks because of segregationist policies and that they are stuck in a cycle which perpetuates the rent dilemma and prevents them from accumulating savings. He is determined to challenge white supremacy and change the "System," which is a character unto itself in this novel because it permeates everything and everyone. Racism is a basic theme of this book. Alfa proactively seeks to resolve his problems by facing them directly. He refuses to submit to his fears and logically assesses evidence. Alfa is not in denial and is cognizant of reality.

Limping because of a sore knee hurt in a fight with white bullies, Alfa also has a cut lip and injured eye which represents the stresses and resilience of the bus boycotters.

Even though he is weakened, he will prevail. He emphasizes the theme of unity in which all Montgomery blacks will boycott the city buses until they can sit where they choose without being removed. Alfa wants to heal society, not provoke further strife. He capably mends wounded animals, setting a pigeon's broken leg and sawing off a wounded leg to save a dog's life which foreshadows the leg wounds he suffers when library guards beat him before Officer Newton offers long-denied remedies to fix Alfa's problems. Exoneration of false accusations represents Alfa's personal and social redemption.

Mama Merryfield personifies the themes of dignity, family, and loyalty. She has survived chronic economic deprivation but has been rewarded with the love and respect of her community. A Tuskegee Institute graduate, Big Mama stands six feet and six inches, describes herself as "Strong as an ox," and is kind to everyone. Almost ninety years old, she cleans houses to earn money to care for her great-grandchildren whose mother abandoned them. Her husband, Reverend Marcus Merryfield, was taller than his wife and respected for his preaching. The couple was known as "the Gentle Christian Giants," and people recalled them skillfully dancing the Charleston. Marcus died after contracting lockjaw during a flood, and Mama Merryfield took care of their three "gems," Diamond, Ruby, and Pearl. Mentioning that the two daughters died in an automobile accident suggests that at one time the Merryfields might have had access to more financial resources.

Also, the love letters Alfa finds from his great-grandfather to Big Mama indicates that they valued literacy. Mama Merryfield reads the Bible and prays often.

Big Mama has fulfilled a nurturing role throughout her life, volunteering as a midwife and wet nurse for people who needed help with their babies. Whites respect Big Mama, whom they refer to as Aunt Lydia, because she "nursed them in sickness and cheered them in sorrow," and often whites' realization that Alfa is her descendant results in them ceasing racist behavior. Big Mama refuses to ride the bus even though most blacks would understand that walking is difficult for a woman of her age. She may have Alzheimer's disease, which was not known at that time, because she gets lost easily, sitting by the street waiting for help, and often does not recognize Alfa and Zinnia. Sometimes she seems to be in a fugue state perhaps due to exhaustion or as if she is unwilling to face reality. Yet, at other times, Big Mama's mind is clear such as making a map to help her navigate her way through Montgomery. When she begins to disrobe at the Williams's house, she upsets Officer Newton, whom she had nursed as a child, and stops his interrogation. Big Mama is self-reliant and has deep spiritual faith. She does not depend on others to support her or her great-grandchildren. She only gives the rent money to her blackmailers because she is afraid of losing Alfa and Zinnia when her blackmailers threaten to report her falsely for negligence. Big Mama calls the children her hope for the future.

Alfa's sister, Zinnia, is fifteen years old and works at a dry cleaners to contribute to the family's funds. She aspires to become a teacher and enjoys reading fiction, especially

mysteries. Zinnia is bossy, businesslike, sometimes mean, and daring, loudly and publicly voicing her distaste for segregation. She likes to attend dances, swapping dresses with friends when she cannot earn extra money to buy new attire. Zinnia also walks to the white movie theater so she can see film stars' pictures on the posters because the black movie theater does not show those motion pictures. Zinnia believes that her mother will return for her someday. Her dreamy nature balances Alfa's realistic outlook so that they can combine their abilities to strengthen their pursuit of justice and resolve conflicts. Sometimes their roles reverse because Zinnia can see the reality such as warning Alfa that the pawnshop clerk would not pay him a fair price for their great-grandmother's frame. Together they emphasize the theme of intelligence.

Although boys are interested in her, Zinnia ignores them to not be distracted from her plans to earn scholarships to nearby Alabama State College.

All three Merryfields are vulnerable to many antagonists. White characters are mostly derogatory and patronizing toward African Americans. Derisive and "faultfinding," Evans Greendale scolds Alfa that he must have a plan to deal with the bullies who torment Alfa. A former boxer, he is a "small, wiry man" who "looked ridiculous dancing around in the heat" with "fists jabbing the air." He accuses Alfa of being late to work when he is not and does not appreciate the care Alfa takes in displaying groceries and assuming tasks to carry heavy boxes. Mr. Greendale displays mixed messages to Alfa. Perhaps to show respect he calls Alfa by the more formal name Alfred, although sometimes he says Albert by mistake. He often permits Alfa to take home dented cans and other groceries. Mr. Greendale reveals his weakness when he has to cater to whites who suggest they will shop at other grocery stores if they are dissatisfied with his services. He fires Alfa when he asks for time to defend himself against accusations of thievery, but then is friendly and generous when he realizes Alfa is innocent.

The Merryfields and most Montgomery blacks rely on whites as a source of salaries.

Dr. Silas L. Williams and his wife represent affluence and apathy. Although they should care about people's well-being because of Dr. Williams's profession, they are focused only on their own desires and interests.

Mrs. Williams does not care that she humiliates the Merryfields to cover her own guilt and greed. Dr. Williams is more interested in protecting his wife's reputation than doing the right thing. He does not seem to feel indebted to Big Mama who had saved the life of his cousin, "carrying him to the hospital on her back when he had a heart attack." Paul Adams, Mrs. Williams's brother is present only by name and description, but he emphasizes Mrs. Williams's narcissistic tendencies. Emily Logan is as uncaring toward African Americans and self-absorbed as Mrs. Williams. She leaves Alfa in dust as she drives away, expecting him to deliver her groceries by walking and pulling a wagon instead of loading them in her car. Other whites in authority positions, including the gas station and pawnshop workers, demean Alfa when he tries to ask questions. In contrast, Dr. Williams's nurse helps Alfa and confides in him that she has not been paid. One of Emily Logan's white neighbors tells Alfa where Logan lives, and a white woman tells Alfa the names of bullies who assault him and steal his wages.

Similarly, Louise Cook, the Williams's African-American maid, assists the Merryfields and gives them food.

Fear is a prevalent theme due to abusive and aloof policemen such as Officer Jimmy Newton who do not protect Alfa when bullies are beating him and the library guards who hit Alfa for merely entering the building. Officer Newton is gruff but ultimately treats Alfa more humanely than most of his white contemporaries. He is stirred to act compassionately when Mama Merryfield reminds him that she had helped save him during a breech birth and nursed him with her own milk. Officer Newton gives Alfa money because he realizes that the Williams will never pay the Merryfields.

His unprofessional reaction to Alfa's evidence shows how whites protected whites during segregation.

Alfa fears three bullies, Raymond Baker, Luke Cook, and John Martin, but does not resort to violence and chooses to use his brains to deflect their hostility instead of his fists. He surprises them by introducing himself and calling them by name. In contrast, three white children, Donald, Turner, and Nancy, walk with him and say they will continue to walk until blacks are treated fairly. They address Alfa as their equal and wave goodbye to him, an unexpected social gesture from whites.

Undeveloped characters who serve as red herrings or offer resolution to unexplained mysteries include a woman who is probably Alfa's and Zinnia's "phantom mother," the man in gaudy, flashy clothes who accompanies her, and the loan shark, Mr. Plumber. Susan Merryfield, the daughter of Big Mama's son Diamond, is an unsavory character. A drug addict who loses large sums of money gambling, she remains distant and writes hateful letters asking for money, even though she says she made $10,000 but is in debt, and telling Big Mama to send Alfa and Zinnia to a workhouse because they are delinquents, but Big Mama knows who the real troublemaker in the family is. The unseen presence of the Merryfield's landlord, Mr. Harris, looms at the end of every month. He rents out most of the homes in Sundown and must be inflexible and unsympathetic towards his renters because of Alfa's fears of becoming homeless.

Historical figures are characters in Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues. Alfa hears Martin Luther King, Jr., who was a minister in Montgomery in 1956, urge blacks to reject mistreatment but to avoid physical confrontation. Alfa wants to avoid the tragic fate of Emmett Till, an African-American boy who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 because some people thought he had spoken inappropriately to a white woman. He often reminds himself of Till's death to warn himself not to act too brashly because he knows most whites at that time do not value black males.

Animals are important characters. Alfa reminds himself to be deliberate like a turtle slowly crossing a yard. He saves the pigeon he names Blue Boy and salvages popcorn from a dumpster to feed him. Blue Boy is Alfa's consistent friend, not caring about his race or socioeconomic status. The bird permits him to stroke his feathers and trusts him, eating popcorn from Alfa's ear.

Blue Bird always seems to fly to Alfa's shoulder when he needs comfort. He also saves the life of a dog and befriends other dogs in his neighborhood, pondering how anyone could spend money on a dog when there were so many stray dogs that need homes. This comment underscores Alfa's worries about becoming homeless when so many people in Montgomery are prosperous and could pay their workers more fairly.

He often fantasizes about being able to take flight or having a flock of birds defend him.

At the prayer meeting, Alfa was so inspired that he stated "I felt like rising on wings like a bird." Alfa's ability to heal animals with rudimentary tools such as toothpicks and a hacksaw reveal his competency and potential to become a physician. African Americans in his community recognize his skills and publicly state that he would be a good doctor.

Topics for Discussion

1. Do the characters' voices seem authentic? 2. What does walking symbolize? How are distances presented literally in the novel? How important is time to plot development?

3. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of living in Montgomery during the bus boycott. Why would African Americans stay there? Did they have a choice?

4. Describe the irony of Alfa experiencing economic woes when the purpose of the bus boycott was to hurt racist transportation owners financially so that they would agree to African Americans' demands for equitable transportation.

5. When do readers realize that Alfa has matured emotionally in the novel?

6. Are relationships between blacks and whites depicted accurately or exaggerated? List each character's prejudices and preconceived stereotypes about other people.

7. Why does almost everyone, including the whites, respect Mama Merryfield?

8. What is the role of addiction in this novel? Is everyone addicted to something in some form, such as money, food, or drugs?

9. How is deception portrayed? Who benefits the most, the deceiver or the deceived?

10. Who are the most resourceful characters? What values do they have which reinforce their characterizations? What flaws diminish them?

11. Compare acts of violence and nonviolence in the book. Who is the most successful in achieving his or her immediate and long-term goals?

12. How do characters reveal such qualities as dignity and self-respect? Why did they continue to believe they could make a difference to society despite the obstacles they faced?

13. What does each character risk by retaining their convictions and beliefs regarding racism, discrimination, and justice? What do they gain or lose as a result of their decisions?

14. Who seemed the most heroic to the characters, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., or Mama Merryfield? Which character had the greatest impact on Alfa's and Zinnia's lives? Designate who served as spiritual, civic, and intellectual mentors to the children.

15. Should Robinet have provided readers more closure about the boycott's outcome and how Alfa was affected by that legal success? Or was being exonerated of accusations that the Merryfields stole money and realization of where the rent money was disappearing an adequate conclusion?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the history of Montgomery during 1955 and 1956, and write several journal entries each for five people representing different racial and socioeconomic groups (include both ordinary people—these can be based on real people or fictional characters you create—and famous people), keeping their voice authentic, based on their perceptions of events.

2. Consulting contemporary newspaper or magazine sources, prepare a domestic budget for three people based on 1956 prices in Montgomery. Compare budgets for families representing different socioeconomic classes. Are there any coupons or other strategies to reduce costs?

3. Using newspapers, local histories, the internet, or other sources, compare the lives of black and white twelve- and fifteen-year-olds in 1956 Montgomery and modern preteen and teenage residents. Explain which preteen or teen-ager you would prefer to be and why.

4. Research the topics of racism, white supremacy, and hate crimes, and prepare a paper about advances in racial equality achieved since 1956. Discuss how American society still is not completely equitable and how members of some ethnic and religious groups are targeted.

5. Write an epilogue chapter in which you tell what you think happened to Alfa and his family ten, twenty, and thirty years after the bus boycott. Who does he meet? What does he do? How does the Civil Rights Movement affect him? Are any of his dreams in conflict with societal expectations and assumptions regarding African Americans? Compile a time line with significant Civil Rights events and legislation and fictional milestones in Alfa's life according to your epilogue. What do you think happened to the white children with whom Alfa interacted?

6. Listen to music from the 1950s, and prepare a concert of songs, including hymns and spirituals, that the Merryfields might have heard in Montgomery. Include Alfa's lyrics, and create a song about the bus boycott and its heroes.

7. Write a scene from Alfa's sister Zinnia's point of view.

8. List jargon from the novel that you think is historical or regional, and define the words or terms. Find other terms significant to the Civil Rights Movement, and define then. What does Jim Crow mean? What is the derivation for that phrase?

9. Compare how people have protested social injustices throughout history. What methods seem most effective? How would you speak out about actions you perceive are unfair? Who would you emulate?

10. If possible, visit the Rosa Parks Library and Museum in Montgomery and other Civil Rights landmarks in that city or similar historic sites near your community. Research local history resources such as newspapers and conduct interviews to learn more about the Civil Rights movement and its leaders and opponents in your town. Were there any groups similar to the Montgomery Improvement Association to seek racial equality?

11. From historical accounts, determine the average distance a bus boycotter walked from his/her house to work and back home. Measure this distance in your neighborhood or a track and walk that far for a week. Keep a journal about your experiences and thoughts while walking. How much time did it require for you to cover the distance? Did walking delay or make you late? If so, what penalties, if any, did you suffer? What did the boycotters experience if they were late to work? Chart and walk a comparable course to model how boycotters walked to market and for other necessary, non-work-related domestic chores.

12. Discuss some aspect of segregation that was not directly discussed in the book, such as poll taxes and other tactics to restrict African Americans from voting, the march from Selma to Montgomery, the murder of Civil Rights workers, or attacks on Freedom Riders.

How did the bus boycott relate to these events? Compare strategies, risks, and outcomes of Civil Rights leaders tackling various issues.

13. On a calendar, block out a period of time equivalent to the duration of the bus boycott (381 days), and compare what you did during that time with the endurance of the boycotters. What personality traits and other factors do you think encouraged boycotters to persevere even when confronted with attempts to end the boycott? Why did they have so much solidarity? What alternatives to busses did they utilize?

To what extent did opponents go in an effort to stop the boycott?

14. When did the Civil Rights Movement begin? Learn about pre-boycott Civil Rights efforts and research significant leaders and their actions before, during, and after the boycott. How did the boycott change their lives and ambitions? How were they portrayed by the media and in biographies? Were any mistruths or exaggerations incorporated into accounts as these people became legendary? If so, why? Were any significant activists ignored by the press?

If so, why?

15. When and how was equitable transportation successfully achieved legally?

How did some whites react to this victory? Compare the participants and their efforts with the passage of other Civil Rights legislation, such as Brown v. Board of Education. Place the bus boycott in context with other Civil Rights accomplishments.

For Further Reference

Cart, Michael. Review of Walking to the BusRider Blues. Booklist, vol. 96 (May 1, 2000): 1670. Recommends the novel because "Ultimately, this easily resolved mystery is less compelling than Robinet's quietly dramatic, often poignant re-creation of the early days of the civil rights movement and Alfa's growing determination to 'put up his dukes' nonviolently in defense of his family's dignity."

Knight, Judson. "Robinet, Harriette Gillem 1931-." In Something about the Author, vol. 104. Detroit: Gale, 1999. Biographical sketch of Robinet and list of resources prior to publication of Walking to the BusRider Blues.

Larson, Gerry. Review of Walking to the BusRider Blues. School Library Journal, vol. 46 (May 1, 2000): 176. Remarks that "Despite the emphasis on racial inequities, both black and white characters are shown as vulnerable and capable of change" and offers the following praise: "Ingredients of mystery, suspense, and humor enhance and personalize this wellconstructed story that offers insight into a troubled era."

Roback, Diane, with Jennifer M. Brown and Jason Britton. Review of Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues. Publishers Weekly, vol.

247 (June 10, 2000): 94-95. Labels Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues as a "quasimystery and historical novel." Concludes that "The novel is at its strongest when filling in historical details of the time, such as the volunteer taxi service for bus boycotters, and may well inspire readers to discover more about this important chapter in civil rights history."

Thompson, Deborah L. Review of Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues. Horn Book Guide, vol. 11 (Fall 2000): 311. Supportive of Robinet's novel although "Occasional jarring instances of modern dialogue and terminology are a minor distraction."

Related Titles/Adaptations

Most of Robinet's books have characters, plots, and themes reminiscent of Alfa Merryfield and his family. In particular, Shortning Bread Jackson and his sister Peanuts in Mississippi Chariot (1994) are attempting to earn and save money to help their family escape to Chicago during the Depression. Shortning Bread is resourceful like Alfa and uses his intelligence to trick and manipulate people into believing him to achieve his needs. The novel also explores black-white interactions. In Missing from Haymarket Square (2001), an 1886 Chicago family is evicted from their home and desperate to acquire money for food and help the father, a labor organizer who has been unjustly incarcerated, escape from prison.

Archie Givens, editor of Spirited Minds: African-American Books for Our Sons and Our Brothers (1997), with an introduction by Gordon Parks, describes 107 books, representing various age groups and genres, that portray African-American male perspectives. Young adult books featuring AfricanAmerican protagonists, many in historical settings, include those written by Walter Dean Myers, Bruce Brooks, Virgina Hamilton, Julius Lester, Kristen Hunter, Sharon Draper, Patricia and Fred McKissack, and James and Christopher Collier. The protagonist of Ossie Davis's, Just Like Martin (1992), is Alfa's peer. Christopher Paul Curris's The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 is of particular relevance to Walking to the BusRider Blues. An African-American family from Michigan travels to Birmingham, Alabama, where they experience the racial tension and violence when four girls are killed in a church bombing. Robert Coles has written the nonfiction account of a six-year-old New Orleans girl in The Story of Ruby Bridges (1995).

Other books related to Robinet's themes include Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird (1960), which is a classic novel about white children confronting racism and white-black interactions. Mildred D. Taylor's Roll of Thunder,Hear My Cry (1976) is representative of that author's many books describing African Americans' efforts to overcome discrimination. Resisting racism in a southern community is the central theme of Vicki Winslow, Follow the Leader (1997). The main character in Eleanora E. Tate, The Secret of Gumbo Grove (1987), is an African-American girl who solves a mystery central to her community's identity and well-being much like Alfa figures out who the culprits are in his community. Carolyn Meyer describes why an early-twentieth century African-American neighborhood is forced to relocate in White Lilacs (1993), and then addresses how the biracial descendants of those characters confront discrimination and form their own identities in the sequel, Jubilee Journey (1997).

An Alabama African-American teenager's relationship with her grandmother is examined in Angela Johnson, Toning the Sweep (1993). Trudy Krisher's, Spite Fences (1994), features a white protagonist, Maggie Pugh, living in 1960s Kinship, Georgia, who photographs Civil Rights events and explores black neighborhoods. Segregation that African Americans faced, preventing them from using public facilities is featured in William Miller's Richard Wright and the Library Card (1997). Philippa Pearce, Minnow on the Say (2000) is a reprint revision of The Minnow Leads to Treasure (1955), in which

neighbors David and Adam look for a hidden treasure to save an ancestral family home like Alfa and Zinnia sleuth to protect their family's shack.

For mature readers, Fannie Flagg's, Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe (1987), emphasizes the importance of friendship and empathy in a small Alabama town.

Zora Neale Hurston's Jonah's Gourd Vine (1934), a fictional depiction of her birthplace, Notasulga, Alabama, near Montgomery, focuses on relationships within an African-American community such as Sundown.

Mary Ward Brown, Tongues of Flame (1993) is an anthology of short stories that depict white and black Alabamians. Rita Mae Brown, Southern Discomfort (1982) shows black and white relations in an early twentieth century Montgomery setting, and Patricia Sprinkle, When Did We Lose Harriet?

(1997) is a mystery set in modern Montgomery which reveals how racial attitudes have both stagnated and progressed.

Useful nonfiction sources include memoirs by boycott participants and prize-winning histories. Stewart Burns, ed., Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott (1997) is an anthology of primary sources. David J. Garrow, ed., Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson (1987); The Walking City: The Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955-1956 (1989); and Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (1986) provide historical context for Robinet's novel Fight Over Civil Rights (1993); Tinsley E. as does Taylor Branch, Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63 (1988).

Juan Williams and the PBS production team, Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965 (1987), with an introduction by Julian Bond, is a companion book to a PBS series available on videotape. David Bradley's, ed., The Encyclopedia of Civil Rights in America (1998), is a source of information in three volumes.

Personal accounts include two books by Rosa Parks, Quiet Strength: The Faith, the Hope, and the Heart of a Woman Who Changed a Nation (1994) and Rosa Parks: My Story (1992) with Jim Haskins; Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story (1958); Fred D. Gray's, Bus Ride to Justice: Changing the System by the System, The Life and Works of Fred D. Gray (1994); Robert S, Graetz's, A White Preacher's Memoir: The Montgomery Bus Boycott (1998); and Virginia Foster Durr's, Outside the Magic Circle (1985), edited by Hollinger F. Barnard. The voices of children and young adults telling about their perceptions of the Civil Rights Movement are presented in Sheyann Webb's and Rachel West Nelson's, Selma, Lord, Selnta: Girlhood Memories of the Civil-Rights Days (1980), and Anne Moody's, Coming of Age in Mississippi (1968). Three Alabamians who participated in and documented the Civil Rights Movement are the Reverend Ralph David Abernathy, And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography (1989); John Lewis's, Walking with the Wind: A

Memoir of the Movement (1999); and Charles Moore's (with Michael S. Durham), Powerful Days: The Civil Rights Photography of Charles Moore (1991).

Biographies of significant Civil Rights lawyers in Alabama can contribute to the comprehension of Robinet's characters and their legal struggles. These books include Jack Bass's, Taming the Storm: The Life and Times of Judge Frank M. Johnson and the South's Yarbrough's, Judge Frank Johnson and Human Rights in Alabama (1981); John A. Salmond's, The Conscience of a Lawyer: Clifford J. Durr and American Civil Liberties, 1899-1975 (1990); and Sarah Hart Brown's, Standing Against Dragons: Three Southern Lawyers in an Era of Fear (1998).

Sara Bullard's, ed., Free at Last: A History of the Civil Rights Movement and Those Who Died in the Struggle (1993) was originally developed for the Teaching Tolerance program of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Civil Rights Education Project in 1989. The Oxford edition has an introduction by Julian Bond.

Two books which provide insights into post-Civil Rights race relations and teenagers' attitudes toward race and violence are Paul Hemphill's, The Ballad of Little River: A Tale of Race and Restless Youth in the Rural South (2000) and Morris Dees's and James Corcoran's, Gathering Storm: America's Militia Threat (1996). Hemphill examines why white teenagers committed arson, burning down a black church in rural Alabama.

Dees and Corcoran tell how hate groups were organized in reaction to integration and other public forms of legalized racial and ethnic equality.

A reading of Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues can be complemented with viewing of the 1990 movie, "Long Walk Home," starring Whoopi Goldberg and Sissy Spacek.

This film focuses on a black maid and her white employer during the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Related Web Sites

The Southern Poverty Law Center Teaching Tolerance.
http://www.splcenter.org/teachingtolerance/tt-index.html.

This site includes curriculum packages, teaching tools, and an online magazine.

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