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Once Upon a Time: Teaching about Women and Social Justice Through Literature

By Cynthia A. Tyson and KaaVonia Hinton-Johnson

One half of the world's population is female, yet today's social studies curricula continue to understate the experiences of women around the globe. This is unfortunate because learning about women's contributions has important implications for a redefinition of civic

participatory action. Including historic accounts of the personal and political challenges faced by women would enable a clearer definition of what it means to be a citizen and participate in the global community. Additionally, studying the connections between social justice and women's political struggles for equity can engage teachers and students both academically and personally.

Teaching about women and social justice through literature helps create profiles of courage and possibilities. Some women who struggled with injustice may have decided that the only solution was to give up or conform. But the narratives of women highlighted in the literature listed below show that time and time again, women have successfully challenged poverty, homelessness, institutional racism, illiteracy, domestic violence, and other social ills.

The life stories of women like Indira Nehru Gandhi (former prime minister of India), Rigoberta Menchú (Guatemalan social activist), Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (Burmese political rights activist), Fannie Lou Hamer (African American voting rights advocate), and Patricia McFadden (Voices for Peace in Israel-Palestine) are examples of just a few women who displayed the tenacity of human endurance in the face of adversity.

Literature About Women and Social Justice

The struggle (against sexism, and for gender equity) has led to a reexamination of gender roles and patriarchal institutions, and a growing awareness of the relationship between sexism and other forms of oppression, such as racism, classism, heterosexism, and ableism.¹

Today, stories of women's responses to the injustices of everyday life are finding their ways into books that showcase women's engagement in

social justice while also attracting readers because the books are well written and engaging.

Despite some positive signs, finding teaching materials to forge a theoretical and historical frame of reference concerning social justice and women for elementary, middle, and secondary grade students can be an overwhelming task.

Frequently, teachers underestimate students' ability to read and discuss controversial issues. We overlook the reality that many children and young adults face these very challenges, euphemistically called "controversial issues," in their personal lives. Offering literature about women and social justice² for children and young adults can facilitate opportunities for students to engage in content that is relevant to their lives. Literature provides a natural opportunity for social educators to engage with these issues.

The NCSS Carter G. Woodson Book Award³ has honored outstanding literary works surrounding social justice issues on a yearly basis since 1974. A number of the books that received the award have been about women activists from around the world. These books can be shared with students from elementary to high school.⁴ What follows is a brief selection of books, both award winners and others, that deal with women and social justice in an age-appropriate fashion.

Elementary Level

Fannie Lou Hamer and the Fight for the Vote, by Penny Colman (Gateway Biographies),⁵ documents Hamer's commitment to helping African Americans in Mississippi gain the right to vote in the 1960s.

Honored in 1990 as a Carter G. Woodson Book, *Vilma Martinez*, written by Corinn

Codye⁶ and illustrated by Susie Kilgore, describes Martinez's life as a Latina activist and attorney who has fought continuously for civil rights, particularly within the state of Texas.

Madame C.J. Walker: Building a Business Empire (Gateway Biographies), written by Penny Colman,⁷ describes how Madame C.J. Walker, one of the first black female philanthropists, helped scores of women gain employment and become self-sufficient.

Middle Level

Our Golda: The Story of Golda Meir (1985), written by David A. Adler⁸ and illustrated by Donna Ruff, features the courage and fortitude of Golda Meir as she struggled to defend her country, Israel. Other notable books about Golda Meir for elementary and middle school students include the following titles: *Golda Meir*, by Deborah Hitzeroth,⁹ describes Meir's childhood in Russia, the years she spent in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and her move to pre-Israeli Palestine, where she eventually became a leader. *Golda Meir*, by Karen McAuley,¹⁰ is also excellent.

Ela Bhatt: Uniting Women in India, by Jyotsna Sreenivasan,¹¹ tells of Bhatt's courageous efforts as an organizer in India. She founded the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), an organization comprised of women who attend to women's issues, particularly regarding political and financial power.

Mamphela Ramphele: Challenging Apartheid in South Africa, by Judith Harlan,¹² features Ramphele's fight against racism and sexism in South Africa.

Secondary Level

The Flight of the Red Bird: The Life of Zitkala-Sa, by Doreen Rappaport,¹³ uses the personal documents of Zitkala-Sa, born Gertrude Bonnin, a woman of both Sioux Indian and white heritage, to recount her lifelong fight for Native American rights.

In *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, by Rigoberta Menchú with Elisabeth Burgos-Debray,¹⁴ Menchú describes the adversities her people faced in Guatemala.

Frida Kahlo: Portrait of a Mexican Painter (Hispanic Biographies Series), by Barbara C. Cruz,¹⁵ features the life of the surrealist painter/activist.

Other notable books about women activists that can be used at a variety of levels include the following titles:

Rigoberta Menchú: Defending Human Rights in Guatemala, by Michael Silverstone,¹⁶ tells of Menchú's commitment to the Mayan Quiche people as a leader and coordinator.

Sandra Cisneros: Latina Writer and Activist (Hispanic Biographies Series), by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg,¹⁷ focuses on Cisneros's life as a writer/activist involved in improving her own community.

Native American Doctor: The Story of Susan La Flesche Picotte, by Jeri Ferris (1992 NCSS Carter G. Woodson Book Award winner),¹⁸ narrates the life story of the first female Native American to graduate from medical school.

I Am Rosa Parks, by Rosa Parks with Jim Haskins (1998 Carter G. Woodson Book Award winner),¹⁹ presents, in a form more easily accessible to younger readers, the story of Rosa Parks's involvement in civil rights.

Wilma Mankiller (First Biographies), by Gina Holland,²⁰ features the first woman in modern history to lead a major Native American tribe.

Wilma P. Mankiller: Chief of the Cherokee, by Charnan Simon,²¹ explores the life of the first female leader of the Cherokee Nation.

Aung San Suu Kyi: Standing Up for Democracy in Burma (Women Changing the World), by Bettina Ling,²² is about the life of Burmese political activist Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991.

Maya Lin, by Bettina Ling,²³ details Lin's work as a renowned architect. She designed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., and the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama.

Corazon Aquino (World Leaders Past & Present), by Howard Chua-Eoan,²⁴ portrays the former Philippine leader's involvement in social

causes as well as her development as a political leader.

Mother Teresa (On My Own Books), by Candice F. Ransom,²⁵ depicts the life and contributions of Mother Teresa.

Ida B. Wells: Mother of the Civil Rights Movement, by Dennis Brindell Fradin and Judith Bloom Fradin,²⁶ describes Wells's work as an activist and civil rights advocate long before the 1960s civil rights movement.

Winona LaDuke: Restoring Land and Culture in Native America, by Michael Silverstone,²⁷ describes LaDuke's work as a Native American rights and environmental activist.

Nzingha: Warrior Queen of Matamba, Angola, Africa, 1595 (The Royal Diaries Series), by Patricia McKissack,²⁸ describes Nzingha's struggle to help preserve her country's political power.

Dolores Huerta, by Frank Perez,²⁹ focuses on Huerta's role in forming the union of California migrant workers that later became known as the United Farm Workers.

Marina Silva: Defending Rainforest Communities in Brazil, by Ziporah Hildebrandt,³⁰ spotlights Silva's work as an environmental activist.

The following books also offer a number of biographical portraits of extraordinary women:

Women Who Achieved Greatness (20 Events Series), by Cathie Cush,³¹ contains short biographies of twenty women who are known for a variety of achievements.

Profiles of Great Black Americans: Female Leaders, by Richard Rennert,³² offers short biographies of prominent black female leaders.

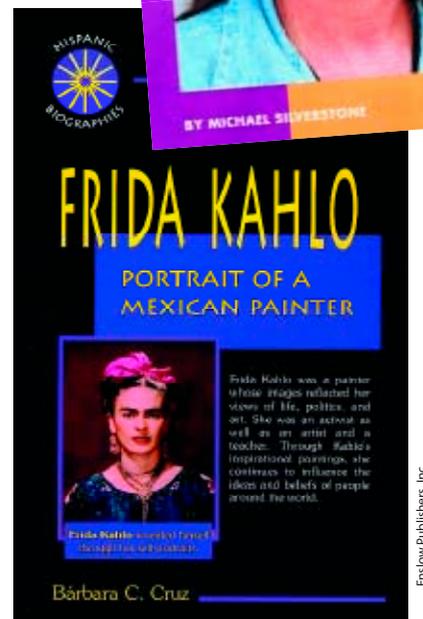
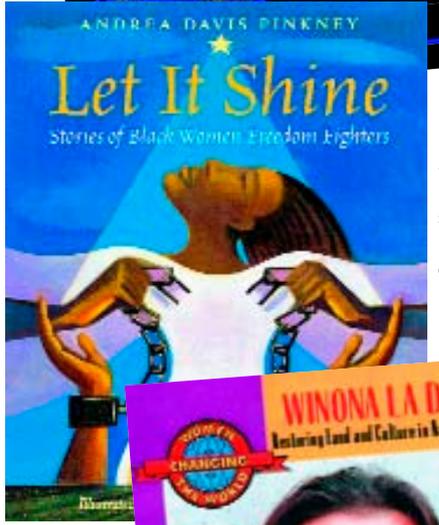
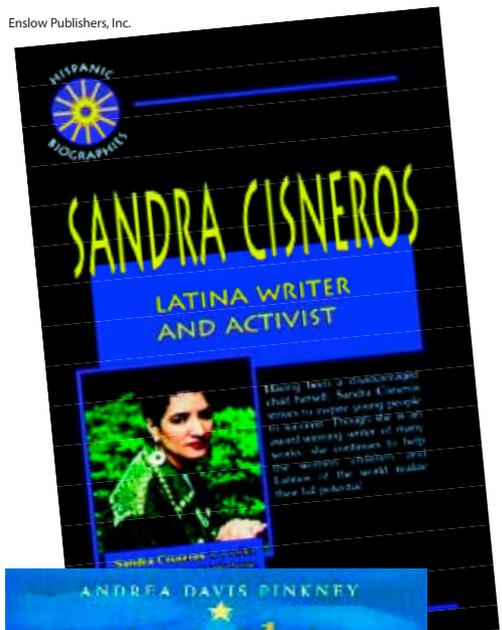
Lives of Extraordinary Women: Rulers, Rebels (and What the Neighbors Thought), by Kathleen Krull,³³ provides twenty biographies of extraordinary women throughout history.

Let It Shine: Stories of Black Women Freedom Fighters, by Andrea Davis Pinkney,³⁴ includes ten biographies of important black women from Sojourner Truth to Shirley Chisholm.

Women of Peace: Nobel Peace Prize Winners (Collective Biographies), by Anne Schraff,³⁵ features nine women who have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Teaching About Women and Social Justice: Coming to Voice, Coming to Power

Teaching is a performative act. And it is that aspect of our work that offers the space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, that can serve as catalyst drawing out the unique elements in each



Courtesy/Harcourt, Inc.

the Feminist Press, www.feministpress.org

Enslow Publishers, Inc.

classroom.
—bell hooks³⁶

Although no exact formulas exist for teaching about women and social justice, some guidelines that many teachers have found useful are worth mentioning. The following steps offer suggested teaching strategies for using literature about women and social justice. Lessons could be built from these principles:

Step 1

Lay the ground rules for encouraging personal sharing, risk taking, and involvement. These are essential for exploring how each of us in our daily lives can contribute to political transformation and social justice action. We cannot take political action without personal interaction.

Step 2

Develop historical and political understandings of racism, sexism, homophobia, class exploitation, etc., and encourage personal understanding of how these problems affect the daily lives of women around the world.

Step 3

Select a region of the world, a social issue, and a woman (or women) who have been involved in either grassroots or institutional efforts, to highlight for study.

Once a text³⁷ is selected (using criteria mentioned above), read the book before you share it with students. Develop an understanding through self-reflection and analysis of how you have interpreted the work and its implications. What do you hope students will gain by reading about this woman's life and political stance? What are your personal biases pertaining to this topic/person?

Introduce the woman to be given distinction (via the literature) through a set of selected quotations from the text. These quotes taken from the text should be divided into three segments:

1. early memories/child experience
2. adolescence/early adulthood
3. the journey to becoming a social activist.

Students can be asked what they know about the history, geography, economic, and political contexts of that region and what they would like to know.

Step 4

Identify critical incidents from the woman's life showing students how ordinary women can do extraordinary things. Challenge patriarchal

approaches. Allow students to comment on their personal experiences or the experiences of family members who have done similar things.

Step 5

Identify a similar issue in local and national communities. This will help students understand that social activism from their spheres of influence can do much to support international efforts. Help students design plans of action appropriate to their ability and willingness. Students' plans of action may include the following:

- Read/Listen/Watch the media on a regular basis to learn about recent developments regarding women's and girls' involvement in social justice causes around the world. Write a response to any articles or programming that seems to be racist, sexist, homophobic, or not in agreement with your viewpoint.
- Conduct research to discover local and international organizations that support your viewpoint or cause, giving particular attention to grassroots women's organizations—using the public library, the Internet, or following up on authors and media sources that have published articles which back your viewpoint.
- Prepare a database/card file of organizations that support and oppose your cause, including contact person, address and phone numbers, and any other related information, such as clippings of their advocacy efforts. Use this information to strengthen your position.
- Pay attention to local political efforts that appear opposed to your viewpoint. Make your opposing point of view known to any/all government officials privy to these political efforts, through a letter, a phone call, or personal appearance.³⁸

Having Her Say in Social Education: The Conclusion of the Matter

Activism—concretizing ethical ideals in action, allows us to better comprehend a form of thinking unfamiliar in abstract academic thought.
—Joy James³⁹

In the curriculum that we as social studies educators present to our students, we must help them realize that when it comes to injustice, all social locations provide opportunities for oppression and struggle. Resistance in both the past and present continues to be the tie that binds men, women, and children in the struggles for equity and the global movement for human rights.

A greater understanding of the connections between social justice and women's struggles for equity has the capacity to motivate teachers and students in the face of numerous challenges. Such challenges may provide inspiration and examples that encourage student involvement in activism for social change. Additionally, the teaching about women as activists and agents for change invites us, for at least one moment in time, in our classrooms, to suspend disbelief and proclaim that there can be liberty and justice for all. 🗣️

Notes

1. Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell, and Pat Griffin, *Teaching for Social Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 110.
2. Cynthia A. Tyson and Todd Kenreich, "Social Studies, Social Action, and Realistic Fiction," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 14, no. 1 (September/October 2001): 22-26.
3. The Carter G. Woodson Book Award is an annual award given by National Council for the Social Studies for outstanding social science nonfiction. "It was first established in 1974, to encourage the writing, publishing and dissemination of outstanding social studies books for young readers that treat topics related to ethnic minorities and race relations sensitively and accurately." (www.socialstudies.org/awards/writing.shtml#woodson.)
4. Often, books are "graded" for readability by publishers, teachers, or those charged with such duties related to selected reading curriculum. Many books, especially picture books, can and should be used across grade levels (K-12) when selected using the criteria for inclusion. The predominant criteria should be if the book(s) meets as many of the selection criteria as possible and is aligned with the lesson objective.
5. Penny Colman, *Fannie Lou Hamer and the Fight for the Vote* (Brookfield, Conn.: Millbrook Press, 1993).
6. Corinn Codye, *Vilma Martinez* (Austin, Texas: Steck-Vaughn, 1993).
7. Penny Colman, *Madame C.J. Walker: Building a Business Empire* (Brookfield, Conn.: Millbrook Press, 1994).
8. David A. Adler, *Our Golda: The Story of Golda Meir* (New York: Viking Press, 1984).
9. Deborah Hitzeroth, *Golda Meir* (San Diego, Calif.: Lucent Books, 1997).
10. Karen McAuley, *Golda Meir* (New York: Chelsea House, 1985).
11. Jyotsna Sreenivasan, *Ela Bhatt: Uniting Women in India* (New York: Feminist Press, 2000).
12. Judith Harlan, *Mamphela Ramphele: Challenging Apartheid in South Africa* (New York: Feminist Press, 2000).
13. Doreen Rappaport, *The Flight of the Red Bird: The Life of Zitkala-Sa* (New York: Puffin Books, 1999).
14. Rigoberta Menchú and E. Burgos-Dubray, translated by Ann Wright, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (London: Verso Books, 1987).
15. Barbara C. Cruz, *Frida Kahlo: Portrait of a Mexican Painter*, Hispanic Biographies Series (Berkeley Heights, N.J.: Enslow Publishers, 1996).

16. Michael Silverstone, *Rigoberta Menchu: Defending Human Rights in Guatemala* (New York: Feminist Press, 1999).
17. Caryn Miriam-Goldberg, *Sandra Cisneros: Latina Writer and Activist* (Hispanic Biographies Series) (Berkeley Heights, N.J.: Enslow Publishers, 1998).
18. Jeri Ferris, *Native American Doctor: The Story of Susan Laflesche Picotte* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Carolrhoda Books, 1991).
19. Rosa Parks with Jim Haskings, *I Am Rosa Parks* (New York: Puffin, 1997).
20. Gini Holland, *Wilma Mankiller*, First Biographies (Austin, TX: Raintree/Steck-Vaughn, 1997).
21. Charman Simon, *Wilma P. Mankiller: Chief of the Cherokee* (Chicago, Ill.: Children's Press, Inc., 1991).
22. Bettina Ling, *Aung San Suu Kyi: Standing Up for Democracy in Burma* (Women Changing the World) (New York: Feminist Press, 1999).
23. Bettina Ling, *Maya Lin* (Austin, Tex.: Raintree/Steck Vaughn, 1997).
24. Howard Chua-Eoan, *Corazon Aquino, World Leaders Past & Present* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988).
25. Candice F. Ransom, *Mother Teresa* (On My Own Biographies) (Minneapolis, Minn.: Carolrhoda Books, Inc., 2001).
26. Dennis Brindell Fradin and Judith Bloom Fradin, *Ida B. Wells: Mother of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Clarion Books, 2000).
27. Michael Silverstone, *Winona LaDuke: Restoring Land and Culture in Native America* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2001).
28. Patricia McKissack, *Nzingha: Warrior Queen of Matamba* (New York: Scholastic, 2000).
29. Frank Perez, *Dolores Huerta* (Austin, Tex.: Raintree Steck-Vaughan, 1996).
30. Ziporah Hildebrandt, *Marina Silva: Defending Rainforest Communities in Brazil* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2001).
31. Cathie Cush, *Women Who Achieved Greatness, 20 Events* (Austin, Tex.: Raintree Steck-Vaughan Publishers, 1995).
32. Richard Rennert, *Profiles of Great Black Americans: Female Leaders* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1994).
33. Kathleen Krull, *Lives of Extraordinary Women: Rulers, Rebels (and What the Neighbors Thought)* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt, 2000).
34. Andrea Davis Pinkney, *Let It Shine: Stories of Black Women Freedom Fighters* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt, 2000).
35. Anne Schraff, *Women of Peace: Nobel Peace Prize Winners*, Collective Biographies (Hillside, N.J.: Enslow Publishers, Inc., 1994).
36. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 11.
37. The use of the word *text* should not limit you to books. In the selection process, remember to use primary source documents, narratives, websites, and anthologies when available. Each can provide many diverse sources with voices less commonly heard.
38. Adapted from www.zmag.org/Activism/actst.htm.
39. Joy James and Ruth Farmer, eds, *Spirit Space and*

Survival: African American Women in (White) Academe (New York: Routledge, 1993), 128.

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