Second Reaction: Portrait from the Civil Rights Era


Jennifer Eason

I opened my Advanced Placement literature class with a simple question: “Who is Thurgood Marshall?” The looks I received were blank, except for one student, who brightened for a moment. “I did a group report on him,” she remembered. “Well, I put the pictures in. I don’t know who he is, though.”

“Okay, what about the NAACP?” I pressed. “What about Jim Crow Laws?” These questions prompted correct answers from one student, while a ripple of “What did he say?” and “What is that?” went through the room for a moment.

Hearing all I needed to, I read aloud the introductory chapter of Up Close: Thurgood Marshall by Chris Crowe, a biography of America’s first African American Supreme Court Justice. The reader is immediately taken into the Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C., on May 17th, 1954, and the scene is a dramatic one:

…hundreds of people wait in “the main chamber of America’s temple of law” in anticipation of the decision on Brown v. Board of Education, a case that could unravel the stringent, racist set of segregation laws that had been upheld by America’s courts for over a century. (17)

Explaining the importance of the case and the agony of the anticipation that day, the book provides the attention-getter any historical biography needs, particularly one of a somewhat unfamiliar, historical figure. The chapter ends with a cliff-hanger—readers do not know what the decision is and will not find out until later in the book.

Though the next several chapters, a chronological biography, do not have the dramatic context of the opening, students were interested to learn about the plight of African Americans in the earlier part of the twentieth century. Chapter two, “A Baby Born Into Jim Crow” holds student interest by showing the many ways that minorities and children were treated unfairly—child labor laws, women’s voting rights, and methods of segregation are discussed.

My students articulated their desire to learn more about this time period once we began reading, and several of them went on to read the entire book. The information is set up clearly and with an accessible vocabulary for middle school and developing readers at the high school level. Images of Marshall as a child, young lawyer, and distinguished Supreme Court Judge are used sparingly but well. Other pictures include mid-twentieth century segregated schools.
Regardless of the effort this biography makes to provide visual and dramatic appeal, it probably will not get student readers unless teachers introduce it in their classes. From my developmental reading class to my Advanced Placement courses, my students tend to favor fiction, and when they read biographies, they choose subjects who are “celebrities” like Paris Hilton or are connected to books they have already read, such as the biography of Anne Frank. After reviewing this book, many students told me that it was not a biography they had a particular desire to read and felt that after the dramatic introduction, there was not a good deal of excitement or high-interest content. *Up Close: Thurgood Marshall* is a perfect book for short, chapter-long read-alouds, particularly the chapters that deal with Marshall’s early work as a lawyer to combat the “separate but equal” rules about higher education. These chapters read well as independent texts, and, as I’ve seen through my own senior level advanced students, provide much-needed education about early civil rights accomplishments and the injustices held up in laws passed by our own government.

Thurgood Marshall is not as well known as other Civil Rights activists and early advocates for changes to our country’s segregation laws, but he is important. As one of my students put it, “I didn’t know he did all that stuff.” Though it may not be many readers’ top choice, Chris Crowe’s biography provides a comprehensive overview of Marshall as a significant cultural and historical figure.

About the Author

Jennifer Marie Eason is a second-year teacher at Frankfort High School in Frankfort, Indiana, where she teaches advanced composition, Advanced Placement British literature, developmental reading, and creative writing. She also serves as the faculty advisor to the high school’s literary magazine.