

The Politics of Children's Literature

What's Wrong with the Rosa Parks Myth

By HERBERT KOHL

ISSUES OF RACISM and direct confrontation between African American and European American people in the United States are usually considered too sensitive to be dealt with directly in the elementary school classroom. When African Americans and European Americans are involved in confrontation in children's texts, the situation is routinely described as a problem between individuals that can be worked out on a personal basis. In the few cases where racism is addressed as a social problem, there has to be a happy ending.

This is most readily apparent in the biographical treatment of Rosa Parks, one of

the two names that most children associate with the Civil Rights Movement, the other being Martin Luther King Jr. The image of "Rosa Parks the Tired" exists on the level of a national cultural icon. Dozens of children's books and textbooks present the same version of what might be called "Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott." This version can be synthesized as follows:

Rosa Parks was a poor seamstress. She lived in Montgomery, Ala., during the 1950s. In those days there was still segregation in parts of the United States. That meant that



African Americans walk to work during the first days of the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott.

African Americans and European Americans were not allowed to use the same public facilities such as restaurants or swimming pools. It also meant that whenever the city buses were crowded, African Americans had to give up seats in front to European Americans and move to the back of the bus.

One day on her way home from work Rosa was tired and sat down in the front of the bus. As the bus got crowded she was asked to give up her seat to a European American man, and she refused. The bus driver told her she had to go to the back of the bus, and she still refused to move. It was a hot day, she was tired and angry, and she became very stubborn.

The driver called a policeman, who arrested Rosa. When other African Americans in Montgomery heard this, they became angry too, so they decided to refuse to ride the buses until everyone was allowed to ride together. They boycotted the buses. The boycott, which was led by Martin Luther King Jr., succeeded. Now African Americans and European Americans can ride the buses together in Montgomery. Rosa Parks was a very brave person.

This story seems innocent enough. Rosa Parks is treated with respect, and the African American community is given credit for running the boycott and winning the struggle. On closer examination, however, this version reveals some distressing characteristics that serve to turn a carefully planned movement for social change into a spontaneous outburst based upon frustration and anger. The following annotations on the previous summary suggest that we need a new story, one not only more in line with the truth but one that shows the organizational skills and determination of the African American community in Montgomery and the role of the bus boycott in the larger struggle to desegregate Montgomery and the South.

Correcting the Myth

1. **Rosa Parks was a poor, tired seamstress. She lived in Montgomery, Ala., during the 1950s.** Rosa Parks was one of the first women in Montgomery to join the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and was its secretary for years. At the NAACP she worked with chapter president E.D. Nixon, who was also vice president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Parks learned about union struggles from him. She also worked with the youth division of the NAACP, and she took a youth NAACP group to visit the Freedom Train when it came to Montgomery in 1954. The train, which carried the originals of the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, was traveling around the United States promoting the virtues of democracy. Since its visit was a federal project, access to the exhibits could not be segregated. Parks took advantage of that fact to visit the train. There, she and the members of the youth group mingled freely with European Americans who were also looking at the documents. This overt act of crossing the boundaries of segregation did not endear Parks to the Montgomery political and social establishment.

Parks' work as a seamstress in a large department store was secondary to her community work. In addition, as she says in an interview in *My Soul Is Rested*, she had almost a life history of "being rebellious against being mistreated because of my color." She was well known to African American leaders in Montgomery for her opposition to segregation, her leadership abilities, and her moral strength. Since the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, she had been working to desegregate the Montgomery schools. She had also attended an interracial meeting at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee a few months before the boycott. Highlander was known throughout the South as a radical education center that was overtly planning for the total desegregation of the South.

At that meeting, which dealt with plans for school desegregation, Parks indicated that she intended to participate in other attempts to break down the barriers of segregation. To call Rosa Parks a poor tired seamstress and not talk about her role as a community leader is to turn an organized struggle for freedom into a personal act of frustration. It is a thorough misrepresentation of the Civil Rights Movement in Montgomery and an insult to Parks as well.

2. **In those days there was still segregation in parts of the United States. That meant that African Americans and European Americans were not allowed to use the same public facilities.** The existence of legalized segregation in the South during the 1950s is integral to the story of the Montgomery bus boycott, yet it is an embarrassment to many school people and difficult to explain to children without accounting for the moral corruption of the majority of the European American community in the South. Locating segregation in the past is a way of avoiding dealing with its current manifestations and implying that racism is no longer a major problem. Describing segregation passively (“There was still segregation” instead of “European Americans segregated facilities so that African Americans couldn’t use them”) also ignores the issue of legalized segregation, even though Parks was arrested for a violation of the Alabama law that required segregation in public facilities. It doesn’t talk overtly about racism. And it refers to “parts” of the United States, softening the tone and muddying the reference to the South. I’ve raised the question of how to expose children to the reality of segregation and racism to a number of educators, both African American and European American. Most of the European American and a few

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of the African American educators felt that young children do not need to be exposed to the violent history of segregation. They worried about the effects such exposure would have on race relations in their classrooms and especially about provoking rage on the part of African American students. The other educators felt that, given the resurgence of overt racism in the United States, allowing rage and anger to come out was the only way African American and European American children could work toward a common life. They felt that conflict was a positive thing that could be healing when confronted directly and that avoiding the horrors of racism was just another way of perpetuating them. I agree with this

second group.

3. **Whenever the city buses were crowded, African Americans had to give up seats in front to European Americans and move to the back of the bus.** Actually, African Americans were never allowed to sit in the front of the bus in the South in those days. The front seats were reserved for European Americans. Between five and ten rows back, the “colored” section began. When the front filled up, African Americans seated in the “colored” section had to give up their seats and move toward the back of the bus. Thus, for example, an elderly African American would have to give up his or her seat to a European American teenager at the peril of being arrested.
4. **One day on her way home from work Rosa was tired and sat down in the front of the bus.** Parks did not sit in the front of the bus. She sat in the front row of the “colored” section. When the bus got crowded she refused to give up her seat in the “colored” section to a European American. It is important to point this out as it indicates quite clearly that it was not her intent, initially, to break

the segregation laws. At this point the story lapses into the familiar and refers to Rosa Parks as “Rosa.” The question of whether to use the first name for historical characters in a factual story is complicated. One argument is that young children will more readily identify with characters presented in a personalized and familiar way. However, given that it was a sanctioned social practice in the South during the time of the story for European Americans to call African American adults by their first names as a way of reinforcing the African Americans’ inferior status (African Americans could never call European Americans by their first names without breaking the social code of segregation), it seems unwise to use that practice in the story. In addition, it’s reasonable to assume that Parks was not any more tired on that one day than on other days. She worked at an exhausting full-time job and was also active full time in the community. To emphasize her being tired is another way of saying that her defiance was an accidental result of her fatigue and consequent short temper. Rage, however, is not a one-day thing, and Parks acted with full knowledge of what she was doing.

5. **As the bus got crowded she was asked to give up her seat to a European American man, and she refused. The bus driver told her she had to go to the back of the bus, and she still refused to move. It was a hot day, she was tired and angry, and she became very stubborn. The driver called a policeman who arrested Rosa.** This is the way that Parks, in her book *My Soul Is Rested*, described her experiences with buses:

I had problems with bus drivers over the years because I didn’t see fit to pay my money into the front and then go to the back. Sometimes bus drivers wouldn’t permit me to get on the bus, and I had been evicted from the bus. But, as I say, there had been incidents over the years. One of the things that made this [incident] ... get so much publicity was the fact that the police were called in and I

was placed under arrest. See, if I had just been evicted from the bus and he hadn’t placed me under arrest or had any charges brought against me, it probably could have been just another incident.

In the book *Voices of Freedom* by Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, Parks describes that day in the following way:

On Dec. 1, 1955, I had finished my day’s work as a tailor’s assistant in the Montgomery Fair Department Store and I was on my way home. There was one vacant seat on the Cleveland Avenue bus, which I took, alongside a man and two women across the aisle. There were still a few vacant seats in the white section in the front, of course. We went to the next stop without being disturbed.

On the third, the front seats were occupied and this one man, a white man, was standing. The driver asked us to stand up and let him have those seats, and when none of us moved at his first words, he said, “You all make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats.” And the man who was sitting next to the window stood up, and I made room for him to pass by me. The two women across the aisle stood up and moved out. When the driver saw me still sitting, he asked if I was going to stand up and I said, “No, I’m not.” And he said, “Well, if you don’t stand up, I’m going to call the police and have you arrested.” I said, “You may do that.”

He did get off the bus, and I still stayed where I was. Two policemen came on the bus. One of the policemen asked me if the bus driver had asked me to stand and I said yes. He said, “Why don’t you stand up?” And I asked him, “Why do you push us around?” He said, “I do not know, but the law is the law and you’re under arrest.”

Mere anger and stubbornness could not account for the clear resolve with which Parks acted. She knew what she was doing, understood the consequences, and was prepared to confront segregation head-on at whatever sacrifice she had to make.

6. When other African Americans in Montgomery heard this, they became angry too, so they decided to refuse to ride the buses until everyone was allowed to ride together. They boycotted the buses. The connection between Parks' arrest and the boycott is a mystery in most accounts of what happened in Montgomery. Community support for the boycott is portrayed as being instantaneous and miraculously effective the very day after Parks was arrested. Things don't happen that way, and it is an insult to the intelligence and courage of the African American community in Montgomery to turn their planned resistance to segregation into a spontaneous emotional response.

The actual situation was more interesting and complex. Not only had Parks defied the bus segregation laws in the past, according to E.D. Nixon, in the three months preceding her arrest at least three other African American people had been arrested in Montgomery for refusing to give up their bus seats to European American people. In each case, Nixon and other people in leadership positions in the African American community in Montgomery investigated the background of the person arrested. They were looking for someone who had the respect of the community and the strength to deal with the racist police force as well as all of the publicity that would result from being at the center of a court challenge.

This leads to the most important point left out in popularized accounts of the Montgomery bus boycott. Community leaders had long considered a boycott as a tactic to achieve racial justice. Of particular importance in this discussion was an African American women's organization in Montgomery called the Women's Political Council (WPC). It was headed by Jo Ann Gibson

Robinson, an English professor at Alabama State University in Montgomery, an African American university. In 1949, Gibson was put off a bus in Montgomery for refusing to move to the back of an almost empty bus. She and other women resolved to do something about bus segregation. The boycott was an event waiting to take place, and that is why it could be mobilized over a single weekend. Parks' arrest brought it about because she was part of the African American

Parks' arrest brought the boycott about because she was part of the African American leadership in Montgomery and was trusted not to cave in under pressure.

leadership in Montgomery and was trusted not to cave in under the pressure everyone knew she would be exposed to, not the least of which would be threats to her life. This story of collective decision-making, willed risk, and coordinated action is more dramatic than the story of an angry individual who sparked a demonstration; it is one that has more to teach children who themselves may one day have to organize and act collectively against oppressive forces.

7. The boycott, which was led by Martin Luther King Jr., succeeded. Now African Americans and European Americans can ride the buses together in Montgomery. Rosa Parks was a very brave person. The boycott was planned by the WPC, E.D. Nixon and others in Montgomery. Martin Luther King Jr. was a new member of the community. He had just taken over the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, and when Nixon told him that Parks' arrest was just what everybody was waiting for to kick off a bus boycott and assault the institution of segregation, King was at first reluctant. However, the community people chose him to lead, and he accepted their call. The boycott lasted 381 inconvenient days, something not usually mentioned in children's books. It did succeed and was one of the events that sparked the entire Civil Rights Movement. People who had been planning an overt attack on



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Rosa Parks remained an activist throughout her long life. In this 1984 photo, Parks participates in an anti-apartheid demonstration in front of the South African Embassy in Washington, D.C.

segregation for years took that victory as a sign that the time was ripe even though the people involved in the Montgomery boycott did not themselves anticipate such a result.

Concluding Thoughts

What remains then, is to re-title the story. The revised version is still about Rosa Parks, but it is also about the African American people of Montgomery, Ala. It takes the usual, individualized version of the Rosa Parks tale and puts it in the context of a coherent, community-based social struggle. This does not diminish Parks in any way. It places her, however, in the midst of a consciously planned movement for social change, and reminds me of the freedom song “We Shall Not Be Moved,” for it was precisely Parks’ and the community’s refusal to be moved that made the boycott possible.

When the story of the Montgomery bus boycott is told merely as a tale of a single heroic person, it leaves children hanging. Not everyone is a hero or heroine. Of course, the idea that only special people can create change is useful if you want to prevent mass movements and keep change from happening. Not every child can be a Rosa

Parks, but everyone can imagine herself or himself as a participant in the boycott. As a tale of a social movement and a community effort to overthrow injustice, the Rosa Parks story opens the possibility of every child identifying herself or himself as an activist, as someone who can help make justice happen.

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