

A First Opinion: (Re)telling Sister Rosa's Story: A Case of Realism to Support Historical Understanding

Edwards, Duncan Pamela. *The Bus Ride That Changed History: The Story of Rosa Parks*. Illus. Danny Shanahan. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

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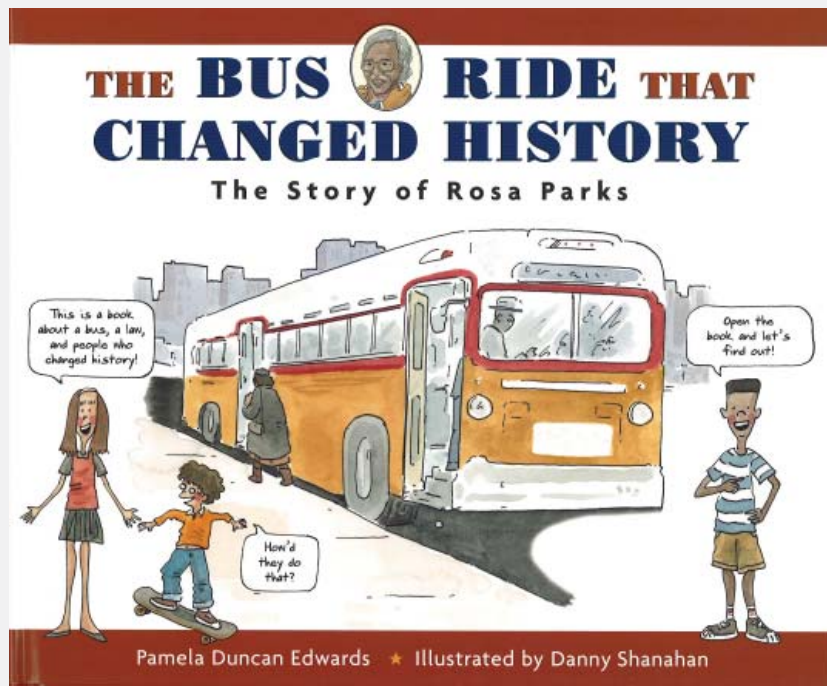
In children's literature, authors have sometimes used celebratory accounts to glamorize historical figures and events. Such descriptions highlight the human ability to triumph over adversity, yet there are unintended consequences, such as deifying the historical figure. For the sake of simplicity and to reinforce core democratic values, celebratory narratives often conceal the complexity of the past. Readers fail to observe the multifarious causes and effects associated with individual actions. Reconciling this issue is beyond the scope of this opinion piece. Rather, it might be more useful and parsimonious to highlight a children's book that employs realism to move beyond celebratory history in order to foster historical understanding.

Realism in children's literature reinforces knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to understand historical events and figures in their complex and holistic nature. By rendering reality closely and in full detail, realism in children's literature emphasizes verisimilitude; thus, historical knowledge is still celebrated yet presented comprehensively. Such narrative accounts foster judgment, empathy, imagination, and agency. Young readers not only develop historical knowledge of the world's people and the inclination to understand their struggles and appreciate their humanity, but also develop ideas and the means to take action.

In her text, *The Bus Ride That Changed History: The Story of Rosa Parks*, Pamela Edwards effectively utilizes realism in literature to convey the complicated temperament and motive associated with Sister Rosa's actions. Readers are able to appreciate and empathize with Sister Rosa's natural setting and social class. Rather than presenting Sister Rosa's actions as ahistorical, Edwards intricately situates Sister Rosa within the larger struggle African Americans waged for civil rights. The author utilizes a matter-of-fact tone that reiterates the moral impact Sister Rosa's actions had on society. We witness the power of one woman's clash with an unjust, inhumane institution. Edwards provides not only an accurate account of Sister Rosa's courageous act, but she also links the past with the

present by articulating how this one moment affected contemporary social, political, and economic developments. Her retelling of the Rosa Parks story enlivens the democratic spirit by framing Sister Rosa amongst her sociocultural and historical background. We are presented with a young Rosa Parks who understands the immoral nature of segregated society. From that vantage point, we witness Sister Rosa's life-long quest to change Jim Crow laws and the conditions created by these discriminatory edicts.

This text, *The Bus Ride That Changed History: The Story of Rosa Parks*, offers a great deal for practioners, librarians, teacher educators, and parents. For each group, the text



reinforces historical understanding by having students engage in historical empathy. By using the student characters to ask pragmatic questions, the text allows adults to engage young learners in deliberative processes. Students are not simply told why an act, law, or judgment was right; they are encouraged to deliberate and discuss the value of Sister Rosa's actions. Such methods promote historical acts not as mere facts, but as sustentative processes necessary to make sense of our past.

The possibilities are endless for this text. It can support a unit on the civil rights movement or how one person can make a difference. Teachers should not, however, read the book alone without anchoring it to more substantive social studies instruction. In addition, the text offers a wonderful way to introduce students to the deliberative debate and discussion process. Students in primary grades can develop teams to decide the fate of Sister Rosa. For example, students may decide whether her actions were justified. All in all, *The Bus Ride That Changed History: The Story of Rosa Parks* provides a wonderful mean for introducing students to the historical learning process by employing realism.

A Second Reaction: Elementary School Students Learn About Equality

Edwards, Duncan Pamela. *The Bus Ride That Changed History: The Story of Rosa Parks*. Illus. Danny Shanahan. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

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The Bus Ride that Changed History: The Story of Rosa Parks tells the events that led to her arrest, the subsequent trial, the bus boycott, and the Supreme Court ruling. Each page has small characters who ask questions or add comments to help enrich the reader's understanding of the events. I shared the book with a fourth-grade class and a first-grade class. Before I read the book to the fourth graders, we had read *The Gold Cadillac* by Mildred Taylor. We made connections between the discrimination Mildred's family experienced and that of Rosa Parks. We also discussed the different types of Jim Crow laws. After reading *The Bus Ride that Changed History*, students commented on how brave Rosa was and said that they learned that everyone can make a difference if they stand up for what they believe. The format of the book interested my students as well. Some students said that the repetitive style reminded them of an educational version of "The Old Woman Who Swallowed the Fly." Others compared it to *The Magic School Bus* because of the small illustration of the children asking questions. All of the fourth graders enjoyed the story. The first grade class was interested but confused by the book. They enjoyed the small characters (which they called leprechauns), but they thought the repetition made the story too long. The theme intrigued them, and they were upset about the unfair laws. I would recommend this book for second through fifth grade. I think second graders have a sufficiently longer attention span and would enjoy the book. Middle school students might find the book too juvenile. I plan on adding this book to my lessons about the civil rights movement. It depicts an event that was an important part of that time in American History, which helped spur major changes on a national level. This book also helps students learn about social responsibility in daily situations.