



## Classroom Guide for **PAUL ROBESON**

written by  
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illustrated by  
**George Ford**

### Reading Level

\*Reading Level: Grades 2-3

Interest Level: Grades 1-6

Guided Reading Level: Q

\*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

### Themes

Entertainers, Activism, Perseverance/Overcoming Obstacles and Hardships, Discrimination, Dreams and Aspirations, Education, Sports, African American and United States History

### National Standards

LANGUAGE ARTS: Reading for Perspective; Participating in Society; Communication Skills

SOCIAL STUDIES: Culture; Time, Community, and Change; Individual Development and Identity; Power, Authority, and Governance

Paul Robeson was born in 1898, and as the son of a pastor, he learned to love written and spoken words at an early age. Within the love of his family he also learned to be proud of being black and to stand up for others and what he believed was right.

Robeson became an accomplished athlete and actor in college and as an adult gained fame as a singer and an actor. His amazing talents won him admirers throughout the world, and he traveled to many countries to perform for his fans. However, the poverty and unfair treatment of people that he witnessed in his own country and abroad led Robeson to become politically active. In the 1940s and 1950s, as the United States government became more and more entrenched in anti-communist rhetoric and action, Paul Robeson became a target. The government revoked his right to travel unless he promised to stop making speeches and just sing.

Robeson did not let the government's actions stop him, and he continued to speak out against discrimination and fight for human rights. Finally, in 1958, after years of court battles, Robeson's passport was returned to him and he was able to travel again. He died on January 23, 1976.

### **Background**

During his lifetime, Paul Robeson was a renowned concert singer, stage and film actor, professional athlete, writer, scholar, and lawyer. At the height of his career he became an outspoken opponent of racism in the United States and fascism abroad. During the McCarthy era (late 1940s through late 1950s), a period of intense anti-communism in the U.S., the government actively persecuted the communist party, its leadership, and others who were suspected of supporting communist causes or of being communists. Paul Robeson became a prime target of McCarthyism because of his relationship with the Russian people and his belief in social welfare. The government also targeted Robeson because of his work in favor of anti-lynching laws, his opposition to the Jim Crow laws, and his support for the liberalization of colonized peoples in Africa and elsewhere.

Although Paul Robeson was a well-known civil rights advocate and a prominent cultural figure during much of the twentieth century, his clash with the United States government all but erased his name from the annals of the American memory for many years. Today, however, Robeson is once again being recognized for his talent as well as the courage and dignity with which he stood up for his beliefs.

### **Teaching Tip**

*Paul Robeson* may be used to introduce a unit on government action or types of government. You might use the book during Black History Month (February) within a collection of stories, both nonfiction and fiction, about African Americans.

## **BEFORE READING**

### **Prereading Focus Questions**

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

1. Do you have a talent that you enjoy sharing with others? What is the talent? How does it make you feel to share your talent?
2. Do you know anyone, famous or not, who is a good actor, singer, and athlete? What kind of person might be good at all three of these things?
3. What actors, singers, or athletes do you look up to? Why do you look up to them?
4. Who is the president of the United States right now? What other political leaders do you know of? What else do you know about politics in the United States?
5. Have you heard the term "less fortunate"? What does it mean? How do people and communities offer assistance to those who need it?

### Exploring the Book

Examine the front cover illustration with students. Ask them why they think the man is surrounded by children from many different countries.

Take students on an illustration tour of the interior of the book. Ask them what they notice about the illustrations. Select a few illustrations and have students describe what they think is happening.

Introduce students to the story synopsis on the jacket front flap (hardcover edition) or inside front cover (paperback edition), the title page, the letter from the author at the beginning, and the afterword on the last page of the book.

### Setting a Purpose for Reading

Have students read to discover the character traits of Paul Robeson and to come to their own conclusions about what kind of person Paul Robeson was.

### VOCABULARY

List the following words on chart paper or the chalkboard and talk about the meaning of each word. Then ask students to take turns adding synonyms or antonyms for the words to the list. The synonyms and antonyms may be single words or phrases.

enslaved	proud	hope	insult
solo	outstanding	glad	rich
loud	attacker	protest	kidnapped

### AFTER READING

#### Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and illustrations in the book to support their responses.

1. What kind of childhood did Paul Robeson have?
2. As a young boy, how did Paul Robeson feel about acting? Why did he feel that way?
3. What did you learn about each of Paul Robeson's family members?
4. How did Paul Robeson like to spend his time as a boy? How are Paul's activities the same as or different from those of children today?
5. Do you have anything in common with young Paul Robeson? What things are they? Did he have any character traits you might want to have? Which ones? Why would you like to have these traits?
6. How do you think Paul Robeson's father felt when Paul was accepted into college?

7. Do you agree or disagree with how Paul reacted during the football tryouts? Why? How would you have reacted?
8. How would you describe Paul Robeson's character? Find places in the story that support your answer.
9. Why do you think Paul Robeson wanted to help those who were less fortunate than he was?
10. What did the United States government do to Robeson? Do you think the government was being fair to him? Why or why not?
11. How did Paul Robeson continue to sing and give speeches in other countries even though he could not travel outside the United States?
12. Why do you think not too many people know about Paul Robeson today? Do you think he should be better known? Why or why not?

### Literature Circles

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing on the different roles of the group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to the ones in the Discussion Question section of this guide.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for passages and phrases that describe the character traits of Paul Robeson.
- The **Illustrator** might draw posters for some of Paul Robeson's concerts or performances in plays.
- The **Connector** might locate books and online resources with information about other African American performers who lived around the same time as Paul Robeson.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of each major part of Paul Robeson's life.
- The **Investigator** might find out more about the communist form of government and why some Americans were fearful of communism in the 1940s and 1950s.

\*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: *Getting Started with Literature Circles* by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), *Literature Circles: Voice And Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and *Literature Circles Resource Guide* by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

### Reader's Response

The following questions or similar ones will help students personalize their responses to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, in oral discussion, or in written form.

1. Did you like Paul Robeson? Why or why not?
2. How did Paul Robeson's relationship with his family shape him? What questions do you have about Paul's family that the story doesn't answer?

3. Of which of the many things he accomplished do you think Paul Robeson was most proud? Which parts of the story lead you to believe this?
4. If Paul Robeson were alive today, which people in the world do you think he would want to help? Why?
5. Was it right for the government to punish Paul for having communist friends? Why or why not? What parallels do you see between how some Americans in the 1940s and 1950s felt about communists and how some people today feel about Muslims?

### **Other Writing Activities**

You may wish to have students participate in one or more of the following writing activities. Set aside time for students to share and discuss their work.

1. You are going to make a movie about Paul Robeson's life. Choose three characters in the story (including Paul) and write an ad for a casting call, indicating the characteristics you want the actor for each character to have. If you wish, indicate one or more actors who might be right for each role.

As a follow up, write a script for a thirty- to sixty-second trailer to advertise the movie online or in movie theaters.

2. Write an article about an event from Paul Robeson's life, such as the concert he gave near Peekskill, New York, in 1949, as it might appear in a magazine or a newspaper.
3. Create a compare and contrast chart using Paul Robeson and another actor, singer, or social activist with whom you are familiar.

### **ELL Teaching Strategies**

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners or who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. Have students work in pairs or small groups to create questions they would want to ask Paul Robeson. Have pairs or groups exchange their questions with each other and answer them as if they are Paul Robeson.
2. Ask students to pick their favorite part of the story or favorite illustration and then describe it in their own words.
3. On chart paper or sentence strips, write words and phrases from the book that might inspire ELL or ESL students. Leave the words and phrases up in the classroom and refer back to them during your exploration of the book.
4. Make a tape of the story for students to listen to. Have them follow along in the book as they listen.

### **INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES**

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas.

### Social Studies

1. Help students locate on a map or globe the places that Paul Robeson visited in the book (England, France, Africa, Canada, France, Russia, the West Indies). Have interested students find out more about each of these places from online and library sources.
2. Have students create a time line of important events in Paul Robeson's life using the book and other sources for information.
3. Have students research McCarthyism and write a short report about it. Some questions they might answer in the report are: Who was Joseph McCarthy? What did the term "McCarthyism" come to mean? Why was the United States government so afraid of communism at that time? What kinds of people were targeted?

### Language Arts/Writing

1. Use *Paul Robeson* as part of a unit on biographies. Ask students to consider why the author wrote the story of Robeson's life chronologically and why they think she included certain details, and not others, from Robeson's life. Ask students if they would change anything about the biography, and if so, what and why? Are there other biographies students have read that are structured differently? Did they like them better, or not, and why?
2. Have students write a review of the book.

### Art

Students might design a flyer advertising one of Paul Robeson's concerts or plays. Have them first meet in small groups to outline the information that should be included, and then create the flyer using art materials or computer software.

### Music/Film

1. Have students listen to a few recordings of Paul Robeson singing. Ask them to describe his voice and compare his songs and type of music to what students like and listen to on their own.
2. If possible, rent one of the movies in which Paul Robeson performed (probably the most famous is *Show Boat*) for students to watch. After viewing the movie, discuss the story, social and political times and themes in the story, and Paul Robeson's role. Many listings of his works can be found online.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Eloise Greenfield** is a celebrated poet and the author of more than forty books of fiction, poetry, and biography for children, including LEE & LOW's *When the Horses Ride By*. Her books have been honored several times by the Coretta Scott King Awards, and she is a recipient of the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children. She has received the Hurston/Wright Foundation's North Star Award for Lifetime Achievement, and has an Honorary Doctor of Education Degree from Wheelock College in Boston. Greenfield has also been inducted into the International Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent. She lives in Washington, D.C.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**George Ford** is an award-winning artist who has illustrated numerous books for children, including several by noted authors such as Nikki Grimes, Eloise Greenfield, Nikki Giovanni, and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Robert Coles. In 1974, he was the recipient of the first Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award for *Ray Charles*, also now published by LEE & LOW. A lifelong jazz enthusiast, Ford lives in Brooklyn, New York, with his wife.

Awards and honors *Paul Robeson* has received include:

- Coretta Scott King Author Award Honor
- Jane Addams Children's Book Award
- Outstanding Merit, Best Children's Books of the Year, Bank Street College

## Book Information

\$18.95, HARDCOVER

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\$9.95, PAPERBACK

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Themes: World Cultures, Celebrations and Traditions, Communities, Human Experiences, Music, Dance, Environments

## RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Learn more about **Paul Robeson** at

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/365/hc/paul\\_robeson](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/365/hc/paul_robeson)

## Also by Eloise Greenfield

***When the Horses Ride By: Children in the Times of War***

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/131/pb/when\\_the\\_horses\\_ride\\_by](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/131/pb/when_the_horses_ride_by)

## Also Illustrated by George Ford

***Ray Charles***

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/96/pb/ray\\_charles](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/96/pb/ray_charles)

## BookTalk with Eloise Greenfield on *Paul Robeson*

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/robeson.mhtml>

## BookTalk with Eloise Greenfield on *When the Horses Ride By*

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/greenfield.mhtml>

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<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/ford.mhtml>

## Order Information

On the Web:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/ordering.mhtml> (general order information)

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/365/pb/paul\\_robeson](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/365/pb/paul_robeson) (secure on-line ordering)

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