



Integration and Inequality: Mid-1900s Midwest American History, As Told by Modern Youth Literature
—Heather J. Matthews

Cline-Ransome, Lesa. *Finding Langston*. Holiday House, 2018. 112 pp. \$10.99 pb. ISBN 9780823445820.
Cline-Ransome, Lesa. *Leaving Lymon*. Holiday House,

2020. 208 pp. \$17.99 hc. ISBN 9780823444427.
Cutler, Jane. *Susie Q Fights Back*. Holiday House, 2018. 112 pp. \$6.99 pb. ISBN 9780823439935.

As I approach reviewing three children’s texts on the subject of race and representation, many Americans are taking to the streets to protest lifetimes of brutality and inequality that stifles Black people and a legal and judicial system that continues to be unequal and unfair. Racism, however, is not just an issue for adults—children are affected by issues of racial and ethnic inequality, and yet many adults are unwilling to talk about these realities with children. In reviewing *Susie Q Fights Back*, *Finding Langston*, and *Leaving Lymon*, it became clear to me that texts such as these need to be available to young readers to facilitate discussions with them about race. Adults must be willing to have difficult and uncomfortable discussions about race and inequality with children, and it is my belief that the above texts can be tools to aid in this discussion. These three middle-grade texts tackle difficult topics with effective and appropriate writing and without minimizing the harsh realities of the American Midwest in the mid-1900s. These fictional, first person novels feature brave and realistic characters doing their best in a system that privileges white children over children of colour. The main characters must come to grips with the fact that they are forced into a place within society, and each must decide for themselves what concepts such as equality, justice, and fairness truly mean. Despite any number of odds stacked against them, such as systemic racism or generational poverty and trauma, each main character struggles and perseveres to create a space for themselves.

Jane Cutler's *Susie Q Fights Back*, published in hardcover as *Susan Marcus Bends the Rules*, tells the story of Susan Marcus, a young white girl who has just moved from New York City, New York, to Clayton, Missouri, with her mother and father. Set in the year 1943, Susie is thrust from the diverse northern city she calls home to a small midwestern town where Jim Crow laws are still strictly enforced. Readers learn that Susie is Jewish, and she befriends a young white Christian girl in her building named Marlene as well as a young Black girl who lives close by named Loretta. Susie, Marlene, and Loretta quickly develop a friendship based in the indignation that Loretta is not treated the same as Susie and Marlene, and the three girls set out to "defy" Jim Crow. The girls take a stand together, finding a legal loophole in the segregation rules that allows them to elude legal restrictions and celebrate their friendship in public. The author, Jane Cutler, modelled some of this story on her own experiences as a young white Jewish girl who moved from New York to the American Midwest as a child. *Susie Q Fights Back*, a PJ Our Way book, was promoted by the PJ Library, which—along with the middle-school branch of PJ Our Way—sends books with Jewish content to families in Canada and the US free of charge ("What Is"). As a PJ Our Way book, *Susie Q Fights Back* was a promoted title distributed to young readers.

Lesa Cline-Ransome's *Finding Langston* and *Leaving Lymon* exist in the same universe as one another and thus share some settings and characters. Cline-Ransome, a Black author, first wrote *Finding Langston*, which tells the story of Langston, a young Black boy who has recently moved from a small town in Alabama to Chicago with his father. The impetus for their move, the recent death of Langston's mother, haunts both father and son, as both miss her in their own ways. Compounding this fact, as he is still wearing his Alabama "country clothing" and speaking with his Alabama accent, Langston finds socializing in school difficult. Adding to Langston's school troubles is his bully, Lymon, and Lymon's friends, Clem and Erroll, who go out of their way to pick on Langston whenever they can, calling him "Country Boy" and mocking his dress, speech, and mannerisms (*Finding* 8-9). Langston lives in the South Side of Chicago, which Langston refers to as Bronzeville due to the high concentration of Black people living in the neighbourhood (2). Set in 1946, Langston is wary of segregation in Chicago, but finds a public library meant for all residents of Chicago, as opposed to a

segregated library (28). There, Langston learns about his namesake and draws power in his identity. *Finding Langston* is a Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book and the winner of the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction.

Cline-Ransome's *Leaving Lymon* delves into the life of Langston's bully, Lymon. This book is neither a prequel nor a sequel to *Finding Langston*; the story acts as a bookend, beginning in 1938 and ending in 1947. Lymon's story begins in Mississippi, where Lymon is living with his paternal grandparents. Lymon's father is incarcerated and sentenced to forced labour, and his mother, uninterested in raising a child, has moved to Chicago to begin a new life. Lymon, for the first few years of the book, is a sweet boy who struggles academically but seems to thrive socially. Over the years, however, his grandfather dies, his father becomes absent, and his grandmother falls ill and is unable to care for him. Lymon is eventually sent to his aunt and uncle, who ultimately pass him to his mother. Forced to move to Chicago, Lymon sleeps on a couch in an already full apartment with his mother, her two sons, and her husband. During these years, from 1945 to 1947, Lymon becomes a different boy: one more concerned with his own well-being than he is anything else, and one who finds an easy target for his own frustrations in the new student, Langston. Lymon's life remains a struggle, but ultimately, he finds solace in music and in himself.

These texts are set during the same relative time period and in the same relative region of the US and thus deal with similar issues of race and ethnicity in daily life. The topic of racism is not often explicitly taught in most middle-grade classrooms due, for instance, to the discomfort of white faculty and staff or the inaccuracies within social studies textbooks (Turner). Keeping in mind that the target reader of each text is ages eight to twelve, each of the three texts only skims the surface of racial inequities in the US, making sure to tell the truth without being too harsh or graphic so as to not upset young readers. Middle-grade readers will find the themes and characters approachable and will not need substantial background knowledge to make sense of the story—however, some guidance may be necessary to examine some topics that the texts address. For example, all three books use the terms “Negro” and “Colored.” Cline-Ransome writes in the peritext of *Finding Langston* that these terms “are intentional and demonstrate the divide that existed at a time between the older traditions of the South and the

racial progress of the North,” and though she does not provide her motivation for using such terms, one can assume a similar reason. Though these terms may be historically accurate, they must be handled responsibly, as this language is no longer acceptable in most cultures and settings. Both Cline-Ransome and Cutler use terms like “Negro” and “Colored” when referring to African American characters as a way to accurately reflect US society in the mid-1900s. For many young readers, however, the use of these terms could be confusing for several reasons. For example, these terms are out of date and students may have never seen or heard such words used and will therefore not know their meanings; likewise, students could learn these words and adopt them into their own vernacular. Therefore, the racial past of these terms is best explored with an adult. If a reader were to consume and repeat terms like “Negro” and “Colored” without being educated on the origins and weight of such terms, the child may be furthering racist practices that the books intend to address.

All three texts deal with issues of segregation. Susie attends a whites-only school, and her friend Loretta attends a different school. Lymon describes his schoolteacher “look[ing] as white as cotton in a room filled with brown faces” (Cline-Ransome, *Leaving* 28). Langston is shocked to learn that his public library is not a space that is segregated, as he naturally assumed most places are. Each child recognizes that segregation exists, and yet no child explicitly states how they themselves are affected in a negative way; segregation is simply accepted as a way of life. Susie is the only character to explicitly name and act against Jim Crow laws, and she is the only white main character of all three books. It is possible that because she is white, she intrinsically knows her punishment will be less than it would for a Black child speaking out; it is also possible that for Black characters, segregation and racism is so virulent that it does not need to be named to be known. Potentially, because Cutler is a white author, she may want to name the Jim Crow laws for authenticity. Unfortunately, these speculations have no answers, and readers may find themselves confused without adult guidance to work through issues of segregation as it appears in these books.

No historical context regarding the damage that segregation caused appears in the stories, nor does any information as to how the US came to the point of segregation; many young readers may not have enough historical knowledge to fill this context in for themselves. In

addition, the matter of segregation creating differences in the legal system or in lifestyle is not addressed. Both Cline-Ransome and Cutler mention inequality and segregation in terms of the differences in quality of items (schools, jobs, housing), but do not deeply address very real systemic problems each character faces (for example, Lymon's father being sentenced to hard labour at a prison [*Leaving*]). Susie is initially ignorant of Jim Crow laws, and when she sets her mind to break the law by going to a restaurant with both her white friend and her Black friend, she is confronted with a harsh truth. Her white friend, Marlene, states, "What would they do . . . Call the police to come put three innocent little girls in jail or something?" to which Loretta retorts, ". . . naw, I don't think they would put three innocent little girls in jail. I think they would put one innocent little girl in jail. One innocent little colored girl. Me" (Cutler 64-65). Examining the state of the US in the year 2020, Loretta's statement rings of truth—there was and still remains a disparity in the American legal system when it comes to issues of race, and segregation still affects the lives of many Americans.

Both *Finding Langston* and *Leaving Lymon* deal with issues of poverty and family. Both boys deal with mothers who are absent, either by choice or by death, both come from families who experience financial troubles, and both deal with inequality brought on by their circumstances of birth and the decades of racism that predate their lives. Any of these issues independently would be a challenge for a young person to deal with—all of these issues together form a reality fraught with generational and societal problems against which both boys must grapple. Many of the minor characters in both of the above texts deal with similar issues, such as missing family members, the threat of implied or real violence, and differences in how people are treated. For example, Lymon refers often to the fact that reading and writing is difficult for him, which one could interpret as dyslexia, or simply lacking literacy skills, and yet, rather than receiving help from any school faculty member, he often is cast aside (Cline-Ransome, *Leaving* 73-74). One can view this apathy from his teachers as a result of racism and segregation. Time and again, the Black children in *Finding Langston* and *Leaving Lymon* (as well as in *Susie Q Fights Back*) find themselves lacking what they need to truly flourish.

Susie Q Fights Back also features a young Jewish girl during what would become known as the Holocaust. As a Jewish person in New York City, Susie would certainly know about

antisemitism, and yet she, perhaps innocently, affirms her Judaism to two elderly Christian women who just moments before were disparaging Jews. A middle-grade reader may not pick up on this nuance, but adult readers can bring this knowledge into the reading and discussion with young readers. Susie's religious identity provides an additional layer of plot complexity; however, many young readers may not have the contextual knowledge to understand the dangers Jewish people faced in the 1940s nor why Susie's religion should be mentioned at all. Therefore, some readers will need guidance to understand why Susie's Judaism is an important aspect of her story.

Ultimately, all three books hold great value as tools in conversations with children about racial inequality. Even without knowledge of such specific theoretical frames as critical race theory or critical whiteness studies, *Susie Q Fights Back*, *Leaving Lymon*, and *Finding Langston* all lend themselves to discussions of white supremacy and racism in American history and the effects suffered by people both in the mid-1900s as well as now. Given the United States' long past of racist beliefs and actions, which arguably has not yet been resolved, it is crucial to include children in discussions of race and racism. A common misconception exists that talking about racialized issues with children is unnecessary or inappropriate. This view, often held by white parents, often boils down to the idea that children are colour-blind or "not able to see" racial or ethnic differences (Schaefer 320). Recent research, however, has shown that children can identify racial differences as young as six months old (Pauker, Williams, and Steele) and form racial preferences between 2.5 and 5 years old (Kelly, Quinn, Slater, Lee, Gibson, Smith, Ge, and Pascalis; Kinzler and Spelke). Issues of race must be discussed with children of all racial or ethnic identities, as children are cognizant of these differences with or without meaningful conversations with adults. Many parents, however, especially white parents, neglect to discuss race with their children. In 2019, the Hechinger Report found that only 10% of American parents discuss issues of race regularly with their children. The likeliness of discussions of race depended largely on the parent's racial identity—only 16% of white parents discussed race often, and only 23% of white parents discussed race at all. This is compared to Asian parents (68% discuss race to some degree), Black parents (64%), and Latinx parents (58%) (Kotler, Haider, and Levine 26).

It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that many children enter the K-12 education system having had little to no discussions about race or ethnicity. These children then become adolescents who have little to no discussions about race or ethnicity. Despite not having these conversations, these young people develop ideas about race and ethnicity based on their own experiences and preferences and with guidance from peers, parents, media, or any number of other factors. Therefore, the inclusion and consumption of books that feature racially and ethnically diverse characters is critical for all children. These three novels approach issues of race and ethnicity for middle-grade students, some of whom may have no background in thinking critically about race. Furthermore, with their realistic plots, approachable characters, and accessible language, *Susie Q Fights Back*, *Finding Langston*, and *Leaving Lymon* approach race and racism in a way that most children can understand. Add to these texts meaningful discussions led by parents, teachers, or other significant adults, and their value as a resource is incalculable. These books can be part of a personal library, a classroom library, or a public library, and all can be taught or discussed independently, paired, or as a group of three. Of course, as a set of three, the thematic parallels between texts are enhanced. Reading just one book about the United States' racialized history will never be enough, and together, these three books can fill in the gaps left in the individual texts.

Cline-Ransome's books also address another important gap in children's literature: the diversity gap. The Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (better known as the CCBC) publishes statistics regarding character race and ethnicity in children's literature. The CCBC found that in 2019, of the 4,029 children's books received by the CCBC, 1,143 books featured characters that were Black/African, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, or Pacific Islander as main characters, implying that just under 72% of books received by the CCBC in 2019 featured either non-human characters or white characters. This disparity in race representation in literature is often referred to as “pervasive whiteness” (Welch). Books like Cline-Ransome's, which centre Black stories and are written by a Black author, are critically important for all readers. Books for children act as both mirrors—reflecting back and affirming one's own life experiences—and windows—revealing a glimpse

of others' life experiences (Bishop). All three of the above books are beneficial as both mirrors affirming and windows revealing experiences that young readers may be either familiar or unfamiliar with.

Susie Q Fights Back, *Finding Langston*, and *Leaving Lymon* have a part to play in educating students about pervasive racism in the US. They introduce topics that students may be unfamiliar with and are set in a period that students may know little about, but in a way that is accessible to them. Each offers an opportunity to discuss race and ethnicity with young readers; by exposing students to what may be uncomfortable and difficult topics, adults can encourage students to join in the conversation. The onus is on parents and educators to teach about race and ethnicity, no matter the discomfort; we are doing a grave disservice to our children if we ignore what is uncomfortable in hopes that we can shield them. June 2020 began with protests in the streets across the United States to confront racism. We must help students to learn about and discuss these issues themselves so they are equipped to join the conversation.

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