Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre (ES/MS)

Student Learning

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Books Matter

Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre

These are student activities for a highlighted book from ADL's Books Matter: The Best Kid Lit on Bias, Diversity and Social Justice. The books selected teach about bias and prejudice, promote respect for diversity, and inspire social action.

This is adapted from the discussion guides available for educators and families found on ADL's website.

Recommended Ages: 8-12

Pre-Reading and Background
About the Book

A powerful look at the Tulsa Race Massacre, one of the worst incidents of racial violence in our nation's history. The book traces the history of the Black community in Tulsa's Greenwood district and chronicles the devastation that occurred in 1921 when a white mob attacked the Black community. News of what happened was largely suppressed, and no official investigation occurred for seventy-five years. This picture book sensitively introduces young readers to this tragedy and concludes with a call for a better future.

Carole Boston Weatherford (Author) and Floyd Cooper (Illustrator)
Age Range: 8-12
Year Published: 2021

Background: Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921

- During the years following World War I (which ended in 1918), much of the U.S. saw an increase in racial tensions, threats and violence. The Ku Klux Klan had a resurgence, and they were very active. There were lynchings and a general spike in racial violence. “Red Summer of 1919” included racial riots in more than three dozen cities across the U.S. and one rural county in Arkansas.
- During the early 1900’s Tulsa, Oklahoma became a booming oil town and many Black people saw it as a place to settle and prosper. Tulsa’s Greenwood District (named after the mile-stretch of Greenwood Avenue) became known as...
Greenwood Avenue became known as "Black Wall Street." It included a thriving business district with many Black-owned businesses and a surrounding residential area where most of the 10,000 Black Tulsa residents lived. Tulsa was racially segregated and many of the white residents resented the Black community's prosperity and success.

On the morning of May 30, 1921, a young Black teenager named Dick Rowland entered an elevator at a downtown office building. Rowland was in the elevator with Sarah Page, a young white woman who was the elevator operator. At some point, Page screamed. The police were called and the next day, May 31, they arrested Rowland. Sarah Page never pressed charges. Rumors began circulating among the white community. A front-page story in the Tulsa Tribune reported that the police had arrested Dick Rowland for assaulting Sarah Page. This stoked racial tensions, inciting a white mob who came to the courthouse and wanted to lynch Rowland. The Sheriff refused.

That evening, a group of Black men, including many World War I veterans, went to the courthouse to offer help to guard Rowland and protect him from the white people who wanted to lynch him. After the sheriff turned them away, some of the white mob tried unsuccessfully to break into the National Guard armory nearby. With rumors still flying of a possible lynching, a group of around 75 armed Black men returned to the courthouse where they were met by some 1,500 white men, some of whom also carried weapons.

In the early morning hours of June 1, 1921, white rioters looted and burned the Greenwood District. The Governor declared martial law and the National Guard was brought in. Twelve hundred homes were destroyed, 35 city blocks were burned, 8000 people left without a home, and more than 800 people were treated for injuries. Historians now believe as many as 300 people died.

In its aftermath, the incident did not receive any widespread attention and the massacre was left out of history books. In 2001, an official Race Riot Commission was organized to review the details of the event.

In 2018, the John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park was dedicated as a literary landmark, memorializing the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. It was the result of the 2001 Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921.

This 9 minute video, The massacre of Tulsa's "Black Wall Street", provides more historical background for the book.
Discussion Questions and Suggested Activities

Discussion Questions
Below are questions to discuss, or ask yourself as you read.

- What did you learn that you didn’t know before?
- Who lived in the Greenwood District of Tulsa? Why was it known as “Black Wall Street?”
- Why do you think some white people in Tulsa were not happy about Black success and wealth in the Greenwood District?
- Why do you think the Tulsa Race Massacre was not talked about for so long?
- What does “reconciliation” mean and why do you think they built a Reconciliation Park in Tulsa?
- What do you think people should know about what happened?
- Why is it important to learn history, even if it painful and disturbing?
- How did you feel while reading the book and learning about the Tulsa Race Massacre?
- Why do you think the book is called The Unspeakable?

Create your own Reconciliation Memorial

Reconciliation is a process to search for truth, justice and forgiveness.

1. LEARN
Reconciliation Park was created to remember the victims of the Tulsa Race Massacre, acknowledge responsibility and provide healing. Re-read pages 30-31 of the book and explore the John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation website to learn more about it.

2. REFLECT
Reflect on examples of reconciliation in your own life, and in history. Think about bias and injustice in society and select one example that is important to you.

3. CREATE
Design your own memorial for reconciliation. Work alone or with others to create a sketch or model of your memorial design to share. Be sure to consider the following elements:
- Overall structure for the memorial.
- Words and videos to include.
- Sculptures or other imagery to create.
- Mood you want it to convey.
- What people and events are being memorialized.
Learn about the Author

Visit the author's website to learn more about Carole Boston Weatherford.

You may be interested in finding out:

- Where she grew up.
- Her inspiration for writing the book.
- Aspects of her identity and their relevance to the book other books she’s written.
- Her interests and hobbies.
- Her family life, relevant quotes, etc.

What information did you find interesting?
What additional questions would you want to ask her?

Write a Letter or Make a Speech about Injustice

Injustice is a situation in which the rights of a person or a group of people are ignored, disrespected or discriminated against.

Reflect on the injustices that happened in the book.

- What are other examples of places, spaces and situations where there is injustice?

Write a persuasive letter (to your parents, school, Mayor, congressperson or President) or speech about that issue.

Be sure to include:

- Why you think it is unjust.
- What evidence or facts you have.
- What should be done about it.

When your letters or speeches are complete, consider sending them or deliver the speech and record it and share with others.

Additional Resources
Other Books You May Like

- Kamala Harris: Rooted in Justice
- March: Book One (there are also Books Two and Three)
- Lillian's Right to Vote
- The Undefeated

Collections of Recommended Children’s Books on ADL's Website

- Books about Black/African American People
- Books about Race and Racism
- Books about Social Justice

Additional Resources to Explore

- 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre (Tulsa Historical Society and Museum)
- 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission
- Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 (Britannica Kids)
- Tulsa Race Massacre (History)
- What happened 99 years ago in the Tulsa Race Massacre (PBS News Hour)
- What to Know About the Tulsa Greenwood Massacre (New York Times)

Explore more of ADL's Resources for Educators, Parents and Families.
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