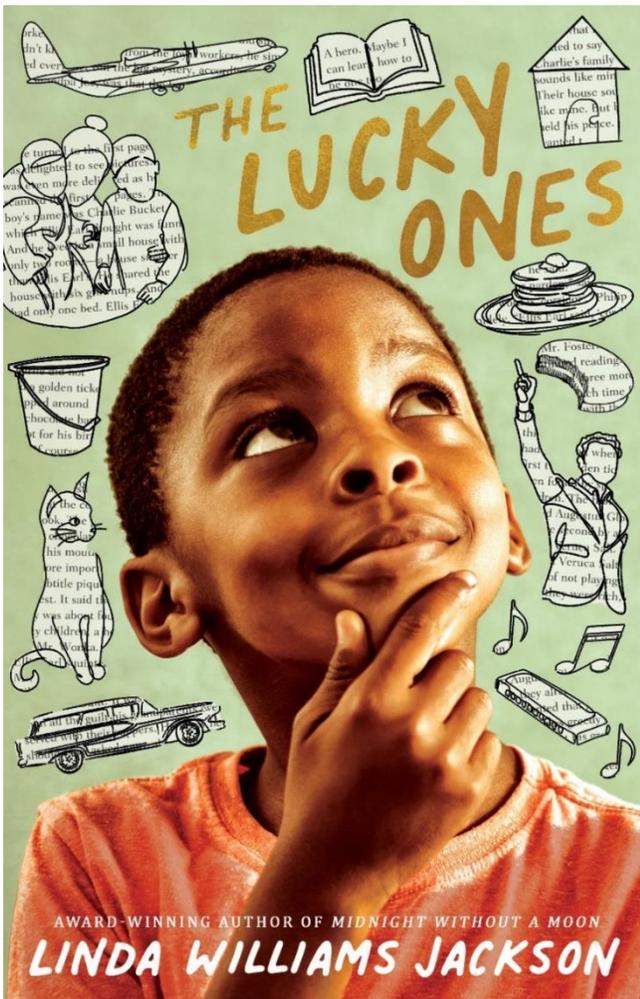


The Lucky Ones by Linda Williams Jackson

Reading Comprehension Questions & Classroom Discussion Guide

About the Book

It's 1967, and eleven-year-old Ellis Earl Brown has big dreams. He's going to grow up to be a teacher or a lawyer—or maybe both—and live in a big brick house in town. There'll always be enough food in the icebox, and his mama won't have to run herself ragged looking for work as a maid in order to support Ellis Earl and his eight siblings and niece Vera. So Ellis Earl applies himself at school, soaking up the lessons that Mr. Foster teaches his class—particularly those about famous colored people like Mr. Thurgood Marshall and Miss Marian Wright—and borrowing books from his teacher's bookshelf. When Mr. Foster presents him with a copy of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Ellis Earl is amazed to encounter a family that's even worse off than his own—and is delighted by the Buckets' very happy ending. But when Mama tells Ellis Earl that he might need to quit school to help support the family, he wonders if happy endings are only possible in storybooks. Drawing on the historical touchstone of Robert Kennedy's southern "poverty tour," Linda Williams Jackson pulls from her own childhood in the Mississippi



Delta to tell a detail-rich and poignant story with memorable characters, sure to resonate with readers who have ever felt constricted by their circumstances.

Published by Candlewick Press

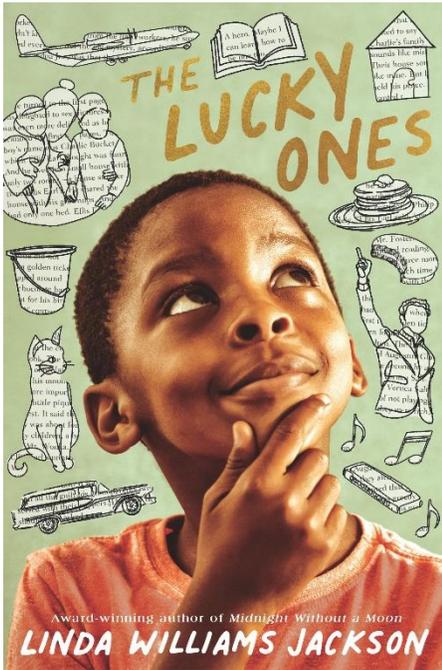
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About the Author



Born and raised in the Mississippi Delta, **Linda Williams Jackson** is an award-winning author of books for young readers. Her first middle-grade novel, *Midnight Without a Moon*, was an American Library Association Notable Children's Book, a Jane Addams Children's Book Award Honor Title, and a Washington Post KidsPost Summer Book Club selection. Her second book, *A Sky Full of Stars*, was named a Malka Penn Award for Human Rights in Children's Literature Honor Book and a Bank Street College Best Children's Book of the Year. Additionally, her books are on many recommended reading lists at elementary and middle schools across the nation. Linda Williams Jackson currently lives in Mississippi with her family.

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The Lucky Ones contains thirty-one chapters plus an epilogue. The book may be used as a classroom read-aloud or read independently by students as an assignment. This discussion guide has two parts: a chapter-by-chapter section with review questions, discussion prompts, and activities and an author Q&A section. Suggested use is a chapter-a-day reading over a two-month period or a two-chapter-a-day reading to complete the book in one month. Either way, this is a book that your students will enjoy delving into and discussing with their classmates in much the same way as characters in the book discuss current events.

This guide may be tailored and duplicated to suit your classroom needs, but it may not be duplicated or altered in any way to be sold online or otherwise.

Suggested Pre-reading Activities

1. The cover of *The Lucky Ones* has sketches of items that represent the story. Have students write predictions of what these pictures might represent. At the end of the book, compare their predictions to the actual story.
2. Based on the description of the book, the main character Ellis Earl doesn't sound very lucky. Have students make a prediction about why the book is titled *The Lucky Ones*.
3. Ellis Earl has a large family—eight siblings and a niece who lives with them! Have students make a prediction about how they think the siblings might get along. This is an also opportunity for the students to discuss their own family size (if they choose) and how families in the past were much larger than contemporary families.

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Chapter One: A Whole Moon Pie to Myself

Review Questions

1. Who is Mr. Foster, and why does he provide Ellis Earl and Carrie Ann a ride to and from school each day?
2. How many other students are included in Mr. Foster's carpool?
3. Why does Ellis Earl insist that he and Carrie Ann be dropped off at the main road rather than have Mr. Foster drive them all the way to their house?
4. Compare Ellis Earl's view of the weekend to Carrie Ann's.
5. Why wasn't Ellis Earl happy to bring home *The Secret of the Old Mill* as his reading choice for the weekend?
6. Even though Ellis Earl normally dreads the weekend, what bit of luck fell upon him this particular Friday?
7. Where did the chapter title "A Whole Moon Pie to Myself" come from?
8. Why does Ellis Earl insist on splitting the food evenly with everyone?
9. Why didn't Ellis Earl eat a whole Moon Pie as Carrie Ann did?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Ellis Earl insists on walking home from the road. Pretend you are one of the other students in the carpool and share your thoughts about how you would view Ellis Earl and Carrie Ann heading down the dusty path toward home on a cold, windy day.
2. When Ellis Earl corrects Carrie Ann's grammar, she says to him, "Well, if that ain't the pot callin' the kettle black." What does this phrase mean and where did it originate? Where do you think Carrie Ann heard it?

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Chapter Two: Four Extra Mouths

Review Questions

1. What is a mantra, and what mantra did Ellis Earl whisper to himself?
2. How did Ellis Earl know that Uncle Joseph had stopped by their house that day?
3. List Ellis Earl's siblings and their ages.
4. Why are Ellis Earl and Carrie Ann the only children in the family who go to school?
5. Why was Ellis Earl concerned that Oscar might not be able to go back to school even if he got better before the school year ended?
6. How will Ellis Earl and Oscar both be eleven years old at the same time when they are not twins?
7. Why was Ellis Earl not happy that his brother Walter and his family had arrived at the house?
8. Why is Ellis Earl okay with his niece Vera living with them but unhappy about the arrival of his other nieces and nephews?
9. What were the sleeping arrangements for the Brown family? How will the arrival of the nieces and nephews affect this?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Reimagine this scene from the points of view of the following family members: Carrie Ann, Oscar, Jeannette.
2. Ellis Earl dreams of living in a better house, so each day he repeats to himself, "One day I will live in a sturdy brick house"—his mantra. Think of a mantra for something you wish to accomplish.

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Chapter Three: Times Is Hard for Everybody

Review Questions

1. How did Ellis Earl and his siblings turn a meal of only beans and cornbread into a boisterous affair of laughter and creativity?
2. What was Ellis Earl's favorite way to "dress up" his beans?
3. Why didn't he dress up his beans this particular night?
4. Describe the seating arrangement for the Brown family during suppertime.
5. Why did Mama eat alone?
6. How old is Mama, and why does Ellis Earl think she's old?
7. What "good" thing had Ellis Earl learned in school that day? Why was Mama excited about it?
8. What type of work did Mama do?
9. Why did Ellis Earl decide he wanted to be a lawyer, and how did Mama dim his enthusiasm?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Make a sketch of the Brown family home during suppertime.
2. If you were part of the Brown family, how would you "dress up" your beans?

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Chapter Four: The Brown Blues

Review Questions

1. Who are the Brown Blues, and why is Ellis Earl jealous of them?
2. Why does Ellis Earl think his brothers chose Jeannette to sing with them instead of him?
3. Why do **you** think the brothers chose Jeannette over Ellis Earl?
4. What was Oscar like before he became ill?
5. Why does Carrie Ann want to be a lawyer?
6. Why doesn't Ellis Earl think that Carrie Ann can be a lawyer?
7. Is this a fair assessment?
8. Give one word to describe Carrie Ann based on this scene.
9. Give one word to describe Ellis Earl.

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Form a group with other classmates and pretend you are the Brown Blues. Sing their song or make up one of your own.

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Chapter Five: Not an Occasion for Celebration

Review Questions

1. Why was Ellis Earl afraid when someone was banging on the front door?
2. Who was banging on the front and why?
3. Who was Eloise and what happened to her?
4. What is a midwife?
5. What is the irony in Sylvia's fear of having a midwife help her deliver her baby?
6. Why do you think the Brown children hardly ever mentioned their oldest sister, Eloise?
7. Identify an example of personification in this chapter.

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Imagine the time when a storm blew open the front door of Ellis Earl's house and write a short scene describing it. (Or draw a picture/graphic novel frames.)

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Chapter Six: Necessary News for Negro Children

Review Questions

1. Ellis Earl usually looked forward to Monday. What is spoiling his joy this Monday?
2. Why did Ellis Earl wish that Oscar was in the carpool with them that day?
3. Why was Ellis Earl not prepared to discuss his *Jet* magazine article?
4. What caught Ellis Earl's eye in his assigned article and why?
5. Compare the information in the article presented by Ellis Earl's classmate Cassandra to how life is for African Americans today.
6. Why did Ellis Earl conclude that Mr. Foster wanted him to focus on the words "black power"?
7. What was the argument that Ellis Earl made against Philip, and do you think it was valid?
8. How did Ellis Earl feel after his disagreement with Philip?
9. List Ellis Earl's classmates mentioned in this chapter.

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Research *Jet* magazine and discuss its importance to the African American community during the Civil Rights Movement.
2. Clip articles from various magazines or newspapers, assign to groups of students, and have discussions.

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Chapter Seven: A Closed Mouth

Review Questions

1. Why did Ellis Earl want to take home leftovers from the lunch Mr. Foster provided?
2. What two things made Ellis Earl speak up and ask for the leftovers?
3. In what ways did Ellis Earl want to be like Mr. Foster?
4. What did Mr. Foster say Ellis Earl would have to do if he wanted to be either a lawyer or a teacher?
5. Who is Miss Marian Wright and why is she important?
6. What important person did Mr. Foster say might visit Mississippi?
7. Why did Ellis Earl prefer to read only the “fun books” that he took home for his younger siblings to read?
8. What book did Mr. Foster suggest for Ellis Earl, and why was he excited to read it?
9. List Ellis Earl’s classmates mentioned in this chapter.

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Check out *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* from the library and follow along with Ellis Earl.
2. Uncle Joseph has said to Mama, “A closed mouth don’t get fed.” What is the meaning of this saying? List other sayings that you are familiar with, such as “A watched pot never boils.”

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Chapter Eight: Save the Cat

Review Questions

1. Why hadn't Ellis Earl noticed the cat on the path?
2. Why was Carrie Ann afraid to move past the cat?
3. Why wasn't Ellis Earl concerned about the cat?
4. Why do you think Carrie Ann changed her mind about the cat so quickly?
5. Why didn't Jeannette allow them to keep the cat?
6. How did Ellis Earl feel about Mama's work?
7. Why did Ellis Earl disobey Jeannette and keep the cat?
8. What did Carrie Ann name the cat and why?
9. Do you think Carrie Ann will be able to keep their secret?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Carrie Ann believed the superstition that a cat crossing her path would bring bad luck. Make a list of other superstitions and discuss their meaning.
2. Write this scene from the cat's point of view.

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Chapter Nine: Marching Over Nonsense

Review Questions

1. List Ellis Earl's classmates mentioned in this chapter.
2. How is the article that is presented by a boy named Jerry Jones similar to our news today?
3. Why won't Ellis Earl's classmate Cora speak up in class?
4. What makes Ellis Earl decide to comment on the article?
5. Why is the girl named Betty angry?
6. Where do you think Ellis Earl heard the phrase "Two wrongs don't make a right"?
7. Ellis Earl and Philip said practically the same thing. Why do you think Mr. Foster and the class reacted more enthusiastically toward Ellis Earl's response?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Focusing on three or four news stories, break into groups and have current events presentations in class.
2. Form two groups and have a class debate for and against Betty's argument.

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Chapter Ten: Thou Shalt Not Covet

Review Questions

1. Why do you think Ellis Earl is surprised that Philip is angry at him?
2. What is covetousness?
3. What is it that Philip has that Ellis Earl desires?
4. Give your own reasons why covetousness might have a negative impact.
5. Why do you think Ellis Earl won't apologize to Philip?
6. How do you think you might handle a similar situation with a friend?
7. Why does Ellis Earl think he will never be as good as Philip?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Regarding his disagreement with Philip, Ellis Earl makes a connection between what he's reading in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and what is happening in his own life. Write about a time this has happened for you and discuss the impact that fictional books can have on our real lives.
2. Write a letter to Ellis Earl and give him advice on how to handle his jealousy toward Philip.

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Chapter Eleven: Not Exactly an African Church

Review Questions

1. Why was Ellis Earl hesitant about attending church with Mr. Foster?
2. Compare Mr. Foster's invitation to Ellis Earl to what might happen today if a teacher invited a student to church.
3. What unfair assessment did Ellis Earl's grandparents have regarding Ellis Earl's father, Walter Sr.?
4. Based on the phrase "every bite of food was served up with a generous helping of guilt," describe how the grandparents might have acted while Ellis Earl's family ate dinner at their home.
5. What quickly ended Ellis Earl's hesitancy about attending church with Mr. Foster?
6. What else did Mr. Foster say that added to Ellis Earl's excitement about attending church?
7. Why didn't Ellis Earl mention the Brown Blues to Mr. Foster?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Write a mock conversation of what might have been said if Ellis Earl had told Mr. Foster about the Brown Blues.

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Chapter Twelve: What Bad Luck!

Review Questions

1. What bad luck greeted Ellis Earl first thing that morning?
2. What misconception did Ellis Earl have regarding the Fair Housing Act?
3. Why do you think Oscar had a hard time believing that “Miss Mary Ann Wright” (Marian Wright) was a lawyer?
4. Besides Ellis Earl and Carrie Ann not being able to attend school, what other bad luck did the Browns face that morning?
5. Compare how Ellis Earl felt about missing school to how a child today might feel about missing school because of the weather.
6. What suggestion did Mama have to help Ellis Earl not feel so badly about missing school?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Imagine it is Carrie Ann who wakes up to the rain instead of Ellis Earl. Write a paragraph showing her reaction to the leaking room and having to miss school that day.
2. Make a sketch of what the front room of the Browns’ home might have looked like that morning after Ellis Earl and Oscar “resolved” the problem of the leaking room.

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Chapter Thirteen: They Are Very Small

Review Questions

1. Besides the possibility of breakfast, why else was Ellis Earl concerned about missing the Easter program?
2. Based on this chapter, what item is common in most homes today that Ellis Earl would have considered a luxury?
3. What book did Ellis Earl read to his nephews?
4. Why did Ellis Earl think that his nephew would be learning to read soon?
5. Why did Jeannette think that Ellis Earl was only pretending to read?
6. What undesirable task did Jeannette ask Ellis Earl to perform?
7. Why did Ellis Earl say that he and Carrie Ann should have named the cat *Unlucky* instead of Lucky?
8. What false assumption did Ellis Earl have about Jeannette and why?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Imagine that Ellis Earl's "conversation" with Charlie Bucket is allowed to continue, uninterrupted, by Jeannette. Write that conversation.
2. Ellis Earl wants to be real-life friends with Charlie Bucket. Which character do you think Jeannette would want to be friends with, and why?

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Chapter Fourteen: You Clumsy Fool!

Review Questions

1. Imagine you are Ellis Earl. Describe how you would feel on wash day.
2. Why do you think Ellis Earl was so concerned about Charlie Bucket?
3. Why did Ellis Earl not notice Carrie Ann standing right in front of him?
4. Why did Ellis Earl prefer emptying the chamber pot over filling the tubs on washing day?
5. Tell this chapter from Carrie Ann's point of view.

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Write a letter to Ellis Earl and tell him about the various ways people do their laundry today.

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Chapter Fifteen: Where There's a Will

Review Questions

1. With Jeannette being only three years older than Ellis Earl, why do you think she has so much authority over him?
2. Why do you think Carrie Ann told Jeannette that Ellis Earl had kept Lucky?
3. Why didn't Ellis Earl have plenty of time to read *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*?
4. Compare how dirty dishes are cleaned in your home to how they were cleaned in Ellis Earl's.
5. What did Ellis Earl dream of doing instead of filling the wash tubs?
6. Describe Uncle Joseph's living room (front room).
7. Why do you think the author uses the term "front room" rather than "living room"?
8. Why did Mr. Foster chastise Ellis Earl for saying he didn't have anything to wear to church?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Write a letter to Ellis Earl and tell him about the various ways people wash dishes today.

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Chapter Sixteen: You Gon' Be Somebody

Review Questions

1. Why did Ellis Earl ask Mama to not turn on the radio?
2. How did Mama feel about Mr. Foster buying Ellis Earl new clothes for church?
3. What is contradictory about Mama telling Ellis Earl that he would "be somebody one day" in light of what she said in the chapter "Times Is Hard for Everybody"?
4. What was Mama's reason for not attending church? Do you agree with her?
5. In this chapter, what professions did Ellis Earl plan to pursue as an adult?
6. What promise did he make Mama based on his future pursuits?
7. How did Ellis Earl ease Mama's disappointment in herself about not taking her children to church and not having a Bible in their home?
8. What four things did Ellis Earl declare that the family would one day have?
9. What name did Ellis Earl's father want to give him? What is your opinion of that name compared to "Ellis Earl"?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Imagine Carrie Ann waking up before Ellis Earl leaves the house. Write a paragraph on how you think she would react.

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Chapter Seventeen: So. Much. Food.

Review Questions

1. What caused Ellis Earl to perspire as he waited on the porch for Mr. Foster?
2. What flustered him even more once he reached the car?
3. Why was Ellis Earl happy that the other boys' houses looked like "dumps"?
4. Besides their homes, what else did all the boys have in common that morning?
5. Why did Ellis Earl wish his siblings were at the Easter program with him?
6. Why was Ellis Earl surprised that Cora spoke to them?
7. Why did Ellis Earl assume that Cora was shy at school?
8. Why did fear grip Ellis Earl when he saw how many people were lining up to be served breakfast?
9. When Cora said it was too bad that Ellis Earl did not attend church on a regular basis, why did Ellis Earl feel sorry for her instead?
10. What advice did Ellis Earl give Cora, and why?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Draw a picture of what you think the banquet hall looks like.
2. Draw a picture of how you think Cora and her brothers look.

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Chapter Eighteen: Carry the Good News to Your Brothers

Review Questions

1. Other than the Easter program, what other times had Ellis Earl been to church?
2. Why do you think Ellis Earl felt "safe" in the sanctuary?
3. How did Ellis Earl reassure himself when butterflies fluttered in his stomach?
4. What made Ellis Earl feel guilty about not mentioning the Brown Blues to Mr. Foster?
5. How did he plan to resolve his guilt?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Using various colors and textures, make "stained glass windows" as an art project. Be creative!

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Chapter Nineteen: No Place for the Blues

Review Questions

1. Why did Ellis Earl think it would be okay for the Brown Blues to sing “non-church” songs at church?
2. Why do you think Aaron assumed Ellis Earl would ask to sleep in the kitchen?
3. Why didn’t Ellis Earl’s brothers want to hear about church?
4. What celebrity singers of the time are mentioned in this chapter?
5. Where did the Brown Blues aspire to perform?
6. How did Ellis Earl convince his brothers to agree to sing in the talent show?
7. How did Ellis Earl feel about what he had done?
8. What advice would you give Ellis Earl against how he convinced his brothers?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Research the celebrity singers mentioned in this chapter and choose one to write a short story about.

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Chapter Twenty: See How We Live

Review Questions

1. What added to Ellis Earl's guilt about lying to his brothers?
2. Despite his troubles, what was something for which Ellis Earl was grateful?
3. Why did Ellis Earl raise his hand even though he did not know what question Mr. Foster had asked?
4. Once he realized the question, why was Ellis Earl so eager to answer it?
5. Why was Ellis Earl not disappointed when Mr. Foster didn't call on him to answer the question?
6. Why do you think Cora and Philip seem to know more about history than some of the other students?
7. Who did Mr. Foster say was coming to visit Mississippi and why?
8. Why did Ellis Earl's classmate Cassandra hope that the special visitor would come to her house?
9. Why do you think Cora wanted to share with the class what she knew about Blanche Kelso Bruce?
10. How was Ellis Earl inspired by what Cora shared with the class?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Pretend that it is Ellis Earl who speaks up rather than Cassandra. Write his speech.
2. If you knew that a politician was coming to your city "to see how people live," would you invite that politician to your home? Why or why not?

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Chapter Twenty-One: The RFK Welcoming Team

Review Questions

1. Why did Ellis Earl want to pinch himself?
2. Why didn't Ellis Earl tell his siblings about the special surprise?
3. Describe the scene at Ellis Earl's house that afternoon as they awaited Mama's and their older brothers' arrival.
4. What did Ellis Earl offer to do for Oscar?
5. Why did Ellis Earl think Oscar would like Charlie Bucket from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*?
6. Why did Ellis Earl tell Mama that today was her lucky day?
7. Why did Mama not think she was so lucky?
8. Why was Mama afraid to allow Ellis Earl to go to the airport?
9. How did this make Ellis Earl feel?
10. How did Ellis Earl unintentionally hurt Mama's feelings, and why didn't he apologize?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Service Project: Read a chapter of your favorite book to a friend or relative.

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Chapter Twenty-Two: Enough Fighting Going on in the World

Review Questions

1. What caused a debate among the younger Brown siblings that afternoon?
2. Why was Ellis Earl not reading *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* as enthusiastically as he had before?
3. How did Ellis Earl respond when his siblings complained?
4. What happened as a result?
5. Describe the scene at the Brown home after the littlest of the Browns had gone to sleep.
6. The following sentence has an example of which type of figurative language: metaphor, simile, or personification? *Guilt hit him so hard this time that it made him shiver.*
7. What caused Ellis Earl to feel this guilt?
8. Why did Ellis Earl and Carrie Ann argue?
9. What reason did Mama give as to why they shouldn't argue?
10. What apologies did Ellis Earl offer as a result?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Write a letter of apology to someone whose feelings you might have hurt.

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Chapter Twenty-Three: Just Walk Slow

Review Questions

1. Why was Carrie Ann being teased during the ride home from school?
2. Why was Ellis Earl anxious to get home?
3. What was the title of the book that Ellis Earl took home for Jeannette, and why did he choose it?
4. What was unusual about today's ride home from school?
5. Describe the Browns' home as Ellis Earl envisioned it through the eyes of Mr. Foster.
6. Why did Ellis Earl rush to have a word with Jeannette before she was able to say anything to Mr. Foster?
7. How did Ellis Earl feel about how Jeannette responded to the gift he gave her?
8. Why did Ellis Earl suddenly change his mind about going to the airport?
9. Why did Mama change hers?
10. On what condition was Mama willing to allow Ellis Earl to go on the field trip?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Check out a Hardy Boys or Nancy Drew mystery from your library and give those books a try.
2. Write a scene imagining what Mr. Foster might have been thinking as he sat in Ellis Earl's house, waiting for Mama to arrive.

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Chapter Twenty-Four: It's a Miracle!

Review Questions

1. Describe how Ellis Earl felt on the morning of the field trip.
2. How did Charlie Bucket's story correlate with Ellis Earl's story at this time?
3. Why was Ellis Earl a hero to the little children?
4. Other than the field trip, what else was special about this day?
5. Why was Ellis Earl nervous about traveling through the city of Belzoni?
6. What figurative language is used in the following statement: *sleep embraced Ellis Earl like a long-lost relative who had finally come home?*
7. What surprise did Mama have for Ellis Earl?
8. Why did Ellis Earl say that his mama was like Charlie Bucket's mama?
9. Why did Mama say she would be like Charlie instead?
10. What did Ellis Earl decide to do with the extra donut?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Write a letter to someone who is a hero to you.
2. Charlie Bucket felt like a real boy to Ellis Earl. Write about a time a character felt like a real person to you.

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Chapter Twenty-Five: The Word Is Corridor

Review Questions

1. Why was Ellis Earl happy and relaxed when he got into Mr. Foster's car?
2. Why was Ellis Earl surprised that Philip lived in a house similar to his own?
3. Describe the difference between what Ellis Earl thought about Philip versus Philip's reality.
4. Why do you think Philip was so intent on correcting Ellis Earl's pronunciation of the word "corridor"?
5. How did this make Ellis Earl feel, and what did it teach him?
6. What brightened Ellis Earl's morning after Philip had darkened it?
7. Why were the students apprehensive about entering the restaurant?
8. Considering the promise Mr. Foster had made to Mama after she agreed to let Ellis Earl attend the field trip, how do you feel about them stopping at this restaurant?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Write letters to Philip and Ellis Earl, encouraging them to be honest with each other and repair their friendship.
2. Draw a picture of how you envision Philip's house.

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Chapter Twenty-Six: Raw Bacon and Untoasted Bread

Review Questions

1. Based on the title of this chapter, what did you predict might happen?
2. Why do you think the waitress's eyes turned "stone-cold" when she saw Miss Callahan?
3. Why do you think she emphasized the word "separate"?
4. What did Ellis Earl believe that the cook was communicating to them through his stare?
5. Why couldn't Ellis Earl focus on talking about *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* after Cora asked him about it?
6. Why did Ellis Earl realize Mama had been right in being apprehensive about the field trip?
7. Why do you think the waitress served the group uncooked food?
8. How do you think the cook might have felt about what happened?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Imagine you are one of the customers in the restaurant. Write this scene from that person's point of view.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven: Silence and Sadness

Review Questions

1. What did the group do about food after the incident at the restaurant?
2. Why was Ellis Earl disappointed that he had fallen asleep?
3. How did the city of Jackson differ from Ellis Earl's hometown?
4. Why did Ellis Earl's classmate Dale believe that the ice cream shop wouldn't serve them?
5. Why were the boys so excited to see an airplane?
6. What made something feel "off" to Ellis Earl?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Imagine the RFK Welcoming Team making a stop at the ice cream shop. Write a paragraph (or a full scene) about what you think would happen.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight: Race Mixers Go Home

Review Questions

1. What greeted the group as they neared the airport entrance?
2. Who was Muhammad Ali, and why do you think he was important to Ellis Earl and his classmates?
3. Why did the group try to shield Miss Callahan from the protesters?
4. How did the protesters taunt Ellis Earl and his companions?
5. How did they respond to the protesters?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Watch the Freedom Singers perform "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round" on YouTube.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine: The Lucky Ones

Review Questions

1. Imagine you are Ellis Earl. Describe how you would feel upon entering the airport.
2. Why did Philip call Ellis Earl brave?
3. Why did Ellis Earl finally admit to Philip that he was jealous of him?
4. What secret did Philip admit to Ellis Earl?
5. How did Philip reinforce a message that Uncle Joseph had previously given Ellis Earl?
6. What advice did Ellis Earl give Philip regarding his parents?
7. Why do you think Philip asked to read *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*?
8. Imagine you are Ellis Earl. Describe how you would feel upon seeing Senator Robert Kennedy.

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Pretend that Ellis Earl and Philip have switched roles, then rewrite their conversation.
2. Portray Ellis Earl's and Philip's conversation in a comic strip.

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Chapter Thirty: Yo' Blues Ain't Like Mines

Review Questions

1. Why do you think Ellis Earl responded the way he did when Oscar answered the door?
2. To whom did Ellis Earl compare Oscar?
3. After the experience of the field trip, what was Ellis Earl determined to do?
4. Why was Ellis Earl nervous when Mama mentioned the talent show?
5. What caused the change in Ellis Earl's attitude when he heard Jeannette say "pank" and not "pink" while singing?
6. What fortunate thing happened as a result of Mr. Foster's hanging around to listen to the Brown Blues?
7. How did this impact Ellis Earl initially?
8. What was the end result of Ellis Earl's trick to get to his siblings to sing in the talent show?
9. Why did Ellis Earl's attitude change regarding having Mr. Foster pick up Carrie Ann and him in front of the house?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Draw a comic (or write a scene) where Ellis Earl tells the Brown Blues that he lied to them about winning money for the talent show.

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Chapter Thirty-One: A Mighty Fine Boy

Review Questions

1. What made Ellis Earl feel that he and Oscar had switched places?
2. Who surprised the Brown children with a visit that afternoon?
3. Why did the children gasp when they heard the name "Kennedy"?
4. Imagine you are Ellis Earl. Describe how you would feel upon hearing the name "Marian Wright."
5. Describe the scene in the Browns' front room from the point of view of one of the visitors.
6. Why did Senator Kennedy say that Ellis was a mighty fine name?
7. How did the entourage end up at the Browns' home and how does that tie in with the title of the book?
8. Why did Jeannette want to silence Ellis Earl?
9. In what way did Ellis Earl show kindness toward his classmates?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Write a version of this scene from Jeannette's point of view.

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Epilogue: That Old House

Review Questions

1. Why did the Brown siblings decide to walk home from the main road today?
2. How did the Brown family get a new house?
3. Where would Philip be spending the summer?
4. Why did Vera say that Ellis Earl was a hero?
5. What significance would the family's move have on the younger Brown children—Deidra, Beatrice, and Vera?
6. Where were the older Brown children—Jeannette, Raymond, Andre, and Aaron?
7. How is the house almost a character itself in the novel?
8. What three things did the new house have that Ellis Earl always wanted?
9. How did Ellis Earl feel about the old house?
10. Do you think the Brown Blues will be a success?

Further Discussion/Suggested Activity

1. Write an epilogue choosing one of the following characters as the main character: Philip, Carrie Ann, Cassandra, Jeannette, or Mama.
2. At the beginning of the novel, Ellis Earl only wants to read picture books. Do you think he will want to read more chapter books after reading *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*? How does Ellis Earl's reading journey compare to your own?

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AUTHOR Q & A

Why does Ellis Earl have such a large family? Wouldn't it have been easier to write the story if you didn't have to write about so many sisters and brothers and nieces and nephews?

Yes! The story definitely would have been easier to write if I had chosen to give Ellis Earl a sibling or two, perhaps just Carrie Ann and Oscar. But I wanted to write the story based on my own experience and based on what Robert Kennedy saw during his "poverty tour" of the Mississippi Delta—large families living in very small houses. My brother and sister-in-law even dropped off *all* their kids at our already crowded house each time they had a baby, and it seemed as if they stayed with us *forever*, even though it was probably only a few days.

Mr. Foster sounds like such a cool teacher. Why have him drive a lime green station wagon? That doesn't sound cool *at all*.

No doubt a station wagon is probably not the coolest thing for a young teacher to drive, but he was transporting eight children and there were no fancy SUVs back then! Actually, a station wagon is how I got to and from school when I attended the Head Start program at age five. I later found out that other children in my hometown also carpooled to and from school in station wagons. Hence, Ellis Earl's cool teacher drives a station wagon, a lime green one to boot.

What kind of books did you read when you were a kid?

Like Ellis Earl, I preferred picture books over chapter books. I didn't read my first novel until I was in seventh grade because I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to read a book that didn't have pictures. The first novel I read was called *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou*. I chose that book because I felt like I could identify with the characters, much like Ellis Earl identifies with Charlie Bucket because they are both in need of basic things like food and good housing. Also, like Ellis Earl, I relied on my school for books. I didn't have books to read during the summer because I didn't have access to the public library. When I was very young, before I started attending school, my older brothers brought home books for us to read. The Curious George books are the ones that I remember.

Where did the idea of a bean competition come from?

We actually had those when I was a kid! We ate beans nearly every day, so we had to make it fun! We each "dressed up" our beans, then we had a taste test to see whose beans tasted the best. We also stood at the table to eat, because we had no chairs.

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I can't believe all those people lived in a house with only one bedroom and two beds.

Did you grow up in a house with only one bedroom?

Throughout my childhood, my family lived in various houses. And, yes, sometimes we lived in a house with only one bedroom with two beds in it. Some of us slept in the living room, which we called the front room, but I don't remember anyone sleeping in the kitchen. I did, however, know a family where the sleeping arrangements consisted of the boys in the kitchen on pallets (folded blankets and quilts) and the girls in the living room with the same. As Ellis Earl's mama said, *Times were hard for everybody!*

Did your siblings form a singing group?

No. I'm not sure if any of my siblings can even sing all that well. As I began writing the story, I gave some thought to what could truly lift this family out of poverty. I thought about the Jackson Five (a famous singing group from the '60s and '70s), and I was going to call the group the Brown Four. But the Jackson Five weren't popular in 1967, so I didn't think it would make sense to the story to use that name. So I came up with the Brown Blues instead.

Ellis Earl says he wants to be a teacher, a lawyer, and a writer when he grows up. What did you want to be?

Definitely not a lawyer! And the thought of being a writer never crossed my mind either! But I, for certain, wanted to be a teacher. I even majored in secondary education my first couple of years in college. But I decided to study math and computer science instead and became a database administrator (like a computer programmer for databases). I began writing shortly after college, but it took me many years after that to "become" a writer.

It seemed kind of odd for a teacher to invite his students to church the way Mr. Foster invited Ellis Earl and the others to the Easter program. Why have Mr. Foster invite him to church and not a student, like Cora?

When I was a kid, it was not uncommon for a teacher to invite students to church or to have the entire class pray before we ate lunch even. The church played a major role in the Civil Rights Movement, and it was a very important source of inspiration for African Americans during the struggle for a better life. But, like Ellis Earl, my family did not attend church, and my mother's reason was that we didn't have nice enough clothes to wear. Also, like Ellis Earl, in sixth grade, a teacher asked me to perform a speech at the Easter program at her church. It was a very long speech—longer than the one that Ellis Earl recited—and, yes, I

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mispronounced the word “messiah.” I did get a new dress, however. But I don’t remember who bought it. (It was not my teacher.)

Ellis Earl doesn’t seem to have a very good relationship with his grandparents. How was your relationship with your grandparents?

I had a pretty good relationship with my maternal grandparents (my mother’s parents). I was never around my paternal grandparents (my father’s parents). I only met my paternal grandmother once, and I never met my paternal grandfather, mainly because they had moved from Mississippi to Indiana before I was born. However, like Ellis Earl and his family, we did spend many Sundays at the home of my maternal grandparents, and my grandmother made us feel guilty when we ate dinner with them. My grandfather, on the other hand, never did.

Did you have a mean big sister like Jeannette?

My two older sisters were very nice to me, but my brothers said they were not very nice to them when they were growing up. They were bossy and mean like Jeannette. But my older brothers were bossy (and sometimes mean) to us little kids (me, my two younger sisters, my brother who is two years older than I, and my niece who lived with us).

Ellis Earl seems closer to Oscar than his other siblings, and not just because of their ages. Did you have a favorite sibling when you were growing up?

I can’t say I had a favorite sibling, but I had more in common with one sibling as opposed to another. And this changed from year to year. At one point, I basically revered two of my older brothers. As time passed, a different brother held that spot. Then, at another time, I grew closer to my brother who is two years older than I. But my closest relationship is with my youngest sister. We have had a very tight bond since high school, and the relationship remains the same to this day.

Did you have a best friend like Philip? And were you jealous of her (or him)?

I did have a best friend, but I don’t recall ever competing with her in class like Ellis Earl did with Philip. I can’t say I wasn’t ever jealous of her though . . .

Did you have a kind uncle like Uncle Joseph?

As a matter of fact, I did. My uncle’s name was John. And if he stopped by our house and saw that we had no food, he would leave and return with a few groceries to get us through the next few days. My uncle also lived in a brick house and had nice furniture. We liked to go to

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his house in the summertime because he had air conditioning! Additionally, he picked us up on Sundays to take us to our grandparents' house.

Did you have a pet like Lucky?

I never officially had a pet, but I guess you could say we were lucky like Ellis Earl and Carrie Ann. Stray cats often wandered into our yard, and we were allowed to "keep" them. One we named "Pretty Boy." I don't remember what we called any of the others.

Did you meet a famous person when you were a kid?

Nope, never did. And even as an adult, I still haven't met anyone as famous as Robert Kennedy. So Ellis Earl was one lucky kid!

Which chapter was your favorite chapter to write, and why?

I loved writing every chapter of this book, so it's very hard to pick a favorite. But if I had to choose, I would say that my favorite chapter to write was the last chapter, the epilogue, because I was able to give the Brown family a happy ending. However, the epilogue was not in the original draft. Nor was it in the second, nor the third draft. The epilogue came after multiple revisions of the manuscript with my editor, who wanted to know how things turned out for the Browns after Robert Kennedy's visit. Before I wrote the epilogue, my favorite chapter was the chapter where Robert Kennedy visited Ellis Earl's home. Even now, I still find it hard to believe that a United States senator actually went inside the homes of people in the Mississippi Delta in order to see for himself how they lived. For further reading, check out *Delta Epiphany* by Ellen Meacham. Ms. Meacham's book gives a detailed, true account of Robert Kennedy's visit to the Mississippi Delta.

Which chapter was your least favorite chapter to write, and why?

I can't say there was a *least favorite* chapter, but more so a *hard* chapter to write, and that is the chapter titled "Raw Bacon and Untoasted Bread." And "Race Mixers Go Home" was no picnic to write either. Do I really need to say why?

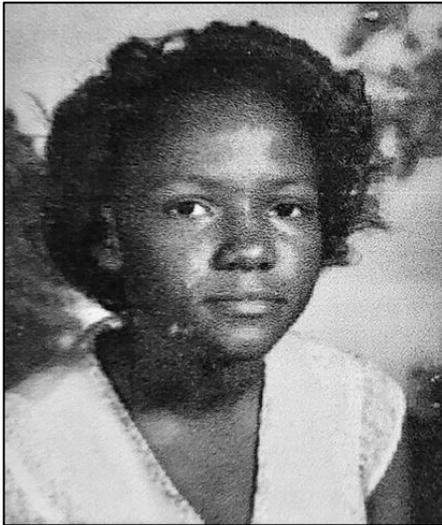
What advice would you give a young, aspiring writer?

Read. Read. Read. Then WRITE. And keep writing until you get it RIGHT. Don't be afraid to write badly at first. Just keep going. Write and rewrite. And rewrite. And rewrite. Then one day what you have written will be just right.

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Old-timey Photos of the Author and Some of Her Siblings:

The author at age twelve, when she finally got the guts to read a book with no pictures. After that, she couldn't stop reading, devouring multiple novels a week. 😊



The author's siblings: Willie Earl, Mary, Gloria, Barbara, Willie Mae, Barbara (again as a teen) & Jessie, Odell & Robert, and Leetonia (yes, Leetonia is a boy's name!) Not pictured: Floyd & Vertis

