

# Destination Discrimination: Navigating the Highways of Segregated America with Trade Books

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Discrimination is not simply dollars and cents, hamburgers and movies; it is the humiliation, frustration, and embarrassment that a person must surely feel when he is told that he is unacceptable as a member of the public because of his race or color.

—Supreme Court Justice  
Arthur Goldberg (1908–1990)

Teaching a civil rights unit in the upper elementary grades can be difficult. Educators must sort through multiple resources, determine the quality and developmental appropriateness of the materials, synthesize and organize the resources into meaningful lessons, and teach the unit in the midst of pressures to minimize or eliminate social studies in deference to tested subjects. Many elementary teachers find this a daunting task, which they avoid<sup>1</sup> in spite of others who have successfully addressed the topic.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the topic of civil rights inherently calls for in-depth analyses of racism, bias, and discrimination; topics that require extensive content knowledge, a deft touch when directing classroom discussions, and sensitivity when selecting curricular materials. Trade books can be an avenue for exploring this topic in lieu of, or as an enhancement to, textbooks that often sanitize or “neatly package” issues of race.<sup>3</sup> “The current situation exemplified by limited textbook content about race, racism, and social justice—unless supplemented with other critical texts or additional knowledge presented by the teacher—is inadequate. ... Teachers can supplement the textbooks with fictionalized books at the elementary and middle school levels.”<sup>4</sup> By selecting books from lists provided by the Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People, Coretta Scott King Awards, and Carter G. Woodson Awards, as well as other reputable sources, teachers can avoid the oversimplification or marginalization of historical events in which black people played major roles<sup>5</sup> and the “heroification, exceptionalism, and omission” that is common in children’s literature.<sup>6</sup>

We would like to suggest a “depth over breadth” model focused around children’s literature texts and primary sources. This format allows for multiple areas of dedicated focus. As an example, for the topic of this article, we have selected automobile travel for black families from the 1920s until the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. Due to the reading and developmental level of the selected texts as well as the likelihood of the civil rights era appearing within the state curriculum for this level, fifth grade is an optimum time to introduce the following activities. Depending on the existing content knowledge of the students, a review or some introductory lessons on Jim Crow and segregationist policies may be required to ensure depth of understanding for the unit.

## Understanding Jim Crow

Although the origin of the term “Jim Crow” is uncertain, many historians trace it to the song “Jump Jim Crow,” written by Thomas Rice in 1832.<sup>7</sup> Rice, a white entertainer, performed the song in blackface using vernacular English and acted foolishly in order to mock African Americans. By 1840, the term came to represent the inequality between races, and writers commonly used it to describe the segregationist practices spreading across America. Near the end of the century, Jim Crow “had become synonymous with a complex system of racial laws and customs in the South that ensured white social, legal, and political domination of blacks.”<sup>8</sup> The Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) sanctioned a racially divided America with the often-quoted misnomer

“separate but equal.” Jim Crow infiltrated multiple aspects of society including education, public services, entertainment venues, eating establishments, restrooms, and separate drinking fountains. Public transportation was a prominent aspect of segregated society. Although the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed segregation on interstate transport — trains (1944), buses (1946), and dining cars (1950) — many southern states dismissed the rulings and continued segregationist practices.<sup>9</sup> State and local laws requiring the separation of races (de jure segregation) on city buses, train cars, and street trolleys extended the disenfranchisement and public humiliation of blacks during their work commute, trips to merchants, or other visits around town.

### Automobility and the Chance to “Drive Past Jim Crow”

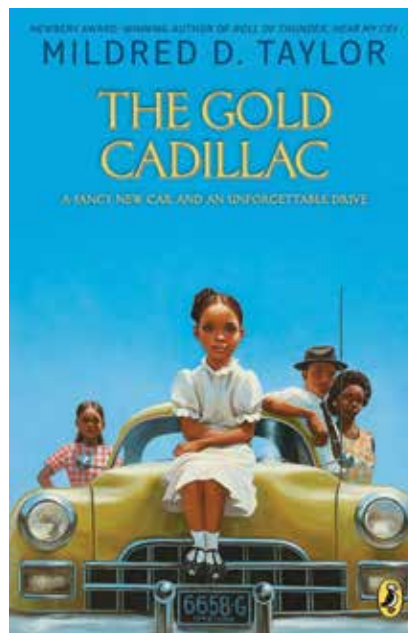
The assembly line, pioneered by Ford Motor Company in 1913, allowed for the mass production of automobiles, which lowered the price of vehicles and increased accessibility for many black families. Owning a car provided a way for them to sidestep the prejudicial laws governing modes of mass transit and also granted them a visible sign of success and newfound “automobility.”<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, they faced regulations and policies designed to limit opportunities for drivers of color, including where they could buy gas and oil, use restrooms, or eat a meal during their travels.<sup>11</sup>

Finding a place to sleep for overnight trips also proved to be challenging. Many motels excluded black travelers, forcing them to sleep in roadside parks or continue driving through the night—a dangerous alternative for exhausted drivers. Some towns, dubbed “sundown towns,” went a step further, barring any black citizens from being inside the city limits after sunset.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, black drivers learned they must universally yield access to white motorists and pedestrians and were discouraged from passing slower cars driven by whites.<sup>13</sup> Driving a car containing mixed races was an extremely dangerous proposition for black drivers and could incite violent acts.<sup>14</sup> Finally, purchasing an expensive vehicle could brand a black driver as disrespectful and elicited resentment and condemnation from white citizens who did not have the financial means for a luxury car.

### Exploring Auto Travel during Jim Crow

After reading or listening to personal narratives of travelers during this time and analyzing images showing the discrimination against African American citizens, students can be given time to read and ponder the text and illustrations in age-appropriate trade books. Analyzing children’s literature after researching expository materials in a variety of media allows learners to become deeply immersed in the topic and build understandings that will form the foundation for future learning on the subject. Four featured texts, all containing depictions of travel for blacks during segregation, are detailed below as a guide to

investigating historical fiction. Teachers may want to help students organize their ideas for a class discussion, presentation, writing assignment, or project. Possible themes might include food, lodging, access to gasoline and other automobile services, and using the restroom.



### *The Gold Cadillac* by Mildred Taylor

*The Gold Cadillac* recounts the experience of a black family taking a road trip from their home in Ohio to visit relatives in Mississippi in the 1950s.<sup>15</sup> The story begins with the father purchasing a new gold-colored Cadillac for the trip. The ostentatious car instantly causes conflicts with various family

members who try to dissuade him from driving it into the Deep South. Lois, the daughter and narrator of the story worries, “They said it was a dangerous thing, a mighty dangerous thing for a black man to drive an expensive car into the rural South.” (p. 24)

On the road in Mississippi, two police officers pull the family over and begin to question the father about the vehicle.

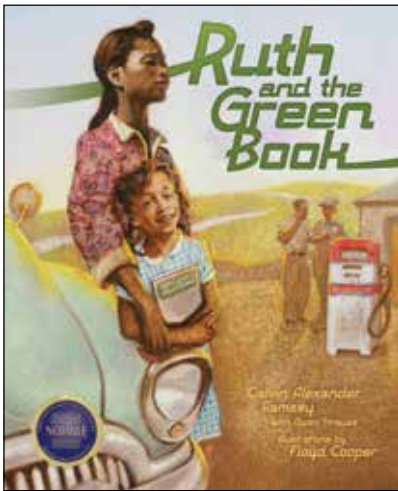
“Whose car is this, boy? ... You’re a liar ... You stole this car.” (p. 30)

In short order, the father finds himself in the back of the squad car being driven to the police station. Three hours later he emerges and explains that he was charged with speeding. As the family drives slowly away, a police car shadows them for several miles beyond the town line. After a tense night during which the family sleeps in the car, the father turns the car around, explaining he’s backtracking to Memphis. “Cousin Halton’s there. We’ll leave the Cadillac and get his car. “Driving this car any further South, it’s just not worth the risk.” (p. 36)

Another theme to explore within this book is access to roadside restaurants. The family packs a lot of food. Lois exclaims, “It was like a grand, grand picnic we were going on, and Wilma and I were mighty excited.” (p. 27) After spotting “WHITE ONLY” and “COLORED NOT ALLOWED” signs on restaurants, motels, water fountains, and other public places, Lois reflects on her mother’s preparation. “Now I understand why my mother had packed it. Suddenly the picnic didn’t seem so grand.” (p. 30)

Buying a new car and taking a trip is exciting for any family

and is something that elementary students may have experienced. After reading *The Gold Cadillac*, teachers can use the discussion questions listed at the end of this article to compare and contrast students' experiences to those of Lois' family.

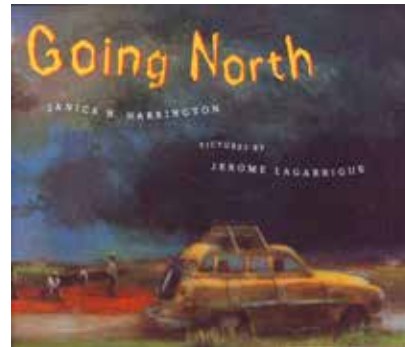


### **Ruth and the Green Book by Calvin Ramsey**

Calvin Ramsey's picture book, beautifully illustrated by Floyd Cooper, vividly describes the difficulties African-American families faced while travelling in the South during the Jim Crow era. Ruth, the narrator, never experienced

discrimination in her Chicago neighborhood, but learned that her family was barred from many motels, restaurants, restrooms, and gas stations as they travelled to Alabama. The family was not allowed to use a gas station restroom and was refused service at a motel, causing Ruth to feel embarrassed, confused, and hurt. She asked why the white business owners didn't want their business. "Wasn't our money just the same?" Trying to explain the Jim Crow laws of the time, her father said it was illegal for blacks to interact socially with whites or to conduct business at white establishments. The family suffered continued discrimination until they reached a gas station in Georgia. The attendant sold them a copy of *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, which gave a state-by-state listing of motels, restaurants, shops and other establishments where blacks were welcome.<sup>17</sup> Ruth said "I couldn't stop reading

it—all those places in all those states where we could go and not worry about being turned away." Using the *Green Book* made the rest of their trip less stressful. The family was able to locate needed services such as a car repair shop and an inn. Teachers may wish to ask their students to reflect upon how they would feel if they were refused services in public places. "Students may also wish to create a map of the trip described in the book, or to chart out other trips in the South using a digital copy of *The Negro Motorist Green Book*" to determine good places to stop along the way.<sup>18</sup>



### **Going North by Janice N. Harrington**

*Going North* tells the story of a black family fleeing the South in hopes of a better future in the 1960s<sup>19</sup> As with the previous two narratives, it is told from the perspective of a

young female protagonist, Jessie. She enjoys her life in Alabama, and doesn't want to move to Lincoln, Nebraska. She's heard the promise of a good job for her father and a better school for her. Moving day arrives, the family loads the yellow station wagon and begins their journey; a narrative retold many times during the Great Migration of the twentieth century.

Jessie doesn't appear to question why the car is packed full of food and why they don't attempt to eat at a restaurant, but her focus soon turns to her father who is intently watching the gas gauge. They must find a "Negro station." In a wonderful symmetry between text and images, the illustrator juxtaposes a gas gauge sitting on empty at the lower left of the spread. The

## **CURRICULUM STANDARDS**

The opportunity exists to address and meet multiple standards within the social studies and ELA curricula during the course of analyzing the trade books and researching automobile travel for black families during the Jim Crow era.

Themes from the Curriculum Standards addressed in these activities include ⌚ **TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**; ⚙️ **POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE**; and 🗳️ **CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**, [www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands](http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands).

Teaching Tolerance Social Justice Standards (grades 3–5) Diversity Standard 10 (DI.3-5.10). "I know that the way groups of people are treated today, and the way they have been treated in the past, is a part of what makes them who they are." [https://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/TT\\_Social\\_Justice\\_Standards\\_0.pdf](https://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/TT_Social_Justice_Standards_0.pdf).

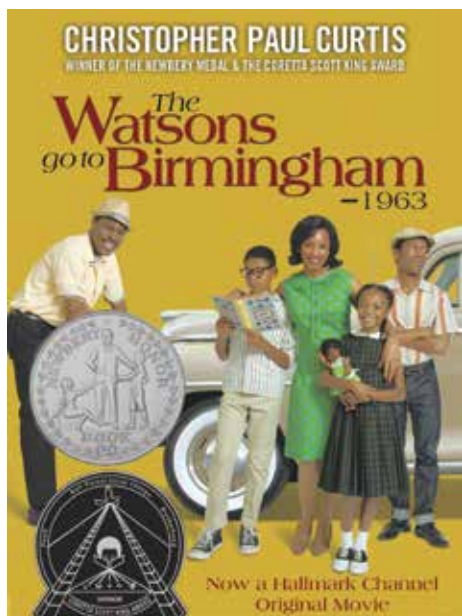
Common Core English Language Arts (grade 5; CCSS ELA-LITERACY 5.2) "Determine a theme of the story, drama or poem from details in the text, including how characters in the story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text." [www.corestrands.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/5](http://www.corestrands.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/5).

remainder of the two pages feature a service station with a white attendant filling the car for a white family as Jessie's family cruises past the pumps.

The next two-page spread features Joe's Gas with "plenty of Negro faces, plenty of Negro smiles." The station attendant, seeing the low gauge, says, "Y'all cutting it close." Back on the road, Jessie wonders if her new home will "be better," leaving the reader to suspect she is weighing the prejudice of the South with opportunities that may await in Nebraska. The next few pages show the family driving through the night. Teachers could ask students to use their knowledge and context of the time period to conclude that no motel would provide the family a room. The remaining pages inform the reader, "Dixie" has been left behind and the family has proclaimed themselves to be brave pioneers, ready for the challenge of a new life.

### **The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963** by Christopher Paul Curtis

This Newbery and Coretta Scott King award-winning novel is the story of ten-year-old Kenny Watson and a road trip his family takes in 1963 from Flint, Michigan, to Birmingham, Alabama.<sup>20</sup> In a delicate balance between authenticity and age-appropriateness, the author includes sensitive material (e.g., the murder of Emmett Till, the Birmingham church bombing, and the use of ethnic slurs) to convey the painful



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### **The Gold Cadillac** by Mildred Taylor

1. Based on your reading, compare and contrast life in the North and South for Black families.
2. How did the Lois' family prepare for their trip? How might preparations have been different for a white family?
3. What types of road signs did Lois see as her family travelled South? How did her father explain them to her? What do you think these signs represented?
4. Why did the policeman stop Lois' family car in Mississippi?
5. Why did Lois' family travel north to Memphis from Mississippi instead of continuing to Alabama?

### **Ruth and the Green Book** by Calvin Alexander Ramsey

1. What does Ruth learn as she travels to visit her grandmother in Alabama?
2. What happened when Ruth's family stopped at a gas station? Why was Ruth embarrassed? How do you think her mother and father felt? Why?
3. How do the illustrations in this picture book contribute to telling Ruth's story?
4. Why did learning about Jim Crow upset Ruth?

### **Going North** by Janice N. Harrington

1. Why do you think Jessie's family wanted to leave their home and move to Lincoln, Nebraska?
2. How do the illustrations explain the difficulties Jessie's family faced while traveling? Do they enhance the story? Explain your answer.
3. What happens on their trip to make Jessie recognize the prejudices Black families faced during the Jim Crow era?

### **The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963** by Christopher Paul Curtis

1. How are the differences between Flint, Michigan and Birmingham, Alabama shown in this story?
2. Why do you think that Momma planned their trip so carefully?
3. How is the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling of "separate but equal" explained by Kenny's father? How many examples of "separate but equal" can you find in the book?
4. Kenny, Byron and Joetta don't seem to understand how Black families experience discrimination in the South until the Birmingham church bombing. How does this event change Kenny and his family?

### **Questions that might be used for all of the books**

1. What themes can you find in the stories you have read about black family travel?
2. How did the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling of "separate but equal" and Jim Crow laws affect black families?
3. What difficulties did the black families experienced in these stories when they travelled?
4. What examples of discrimination can you find when reading these stories?
5. What is racism? How is racism illustrated in these stories?
6. How accurately is discrimination portrayed in these stories? Use facts from earlier lessons to support your response.

reality of atrocities being committed against blacks generally, as well as participants in the civil rights movement. If teachers decide their students are not ready for these advanced themes, it is still possible to select certain passages to use as examples of discrimination against black travelers.

The mobile picnic theme is present in this selection. Kenny’s father says they will stop only once, for hamburgers, news that brings cheers from the back seat. The scene raises some questions for the reader. Will they eat burgers close to their home in Michigan before crossing into the South in hopes of avoiding a humiliating experience? Will they find a roadside burger stand that will provide their meals to go? These questions could serve as discussion starters. What options did black travelers have during this era?

Momma reads the plans for the trip from her notebook, which include a motel stay in Cincinnati, Ohio, and then sleeping

in the car outside Knoxville, Tennessee, at a recommended rest stop. (p. 131) Intertwined within the conversation above, Kenny’s father mentions, “Now if we sleep in the car outside Knoxville...”, causing Kenny to respond, “Momma, how come we just don’t drive until Dad gets tired, then stop?” In his response, his father soft pedals the reality of the situation by using humor (p. 132). The passage is another opportunity to explore the discrimination and how people coped day by day. The epilogue provides a brief historical explanation of the “separate but not equal” society portrayed in the story.

**Conclusion**

The fictional, but believable, characters in these stories add a personal dimension to the topics being studied that helps students understand the impact of historical events on individual lives. Additionally, reading and reviewing trade

**Examples of Discrimination Depicted in Selected Books**

Fill in the cells with examples of discrimination that are described in these four books. Not every cell will be filled.

<i>Life Situation or Event</i>	<i>Going North</i>	<i>The Gold Cadillac</i>	<i>Ruth and the Green Book</i>	<i>The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963</i>
Purchasing a car				
Buying gas or other automobile services				
Lodging				
Eating in restaurants				
Visiting stores or other businesses				
Finding a restroom				
Interacting with police				

books expands students' exposure to historical fiction and provides an opportunity to learn about analyzing the accuracy of fictional texts. Using these resources in conjunction with factual materials can enhance an exploration of the Civil Rights era.<sup>21</sup> ●

#### Notes

1. Ellen Bigler, Jessica T. Shiller, and Lara Willox, "The Teaching of Race and Class in American Social Studies Classrooms," in *The Status of Social Studies*, Jeff Passe and Paul G. Fitchett, eds. (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2013), 153–168.
2. Julie M. Hughes, Rebecca S. Bigler, and Sheri R. Levy, "Consequences of Learning about Historical Racism among European American and African American Children," *Child Development* 78 no.6 (November/December 2007): 1689–1705.
3. Jane Bolgatz, "Revolutionary Talk: Elementary Teacher and Students Discuss Race in a Social Studies Class," *The Social Studies* 96, no. 6 (November/December 2005): 259–264.
4. Keffrelyn D. Brown and Anthony L. Brown, "Teaching K-8 Students about Race: African Americans, Racism, and the Struggle for Social Justice in the U.S.," *Multicultural Education* 19, no. 1 (Fall, 2011): 9, 10.
5. Eric Groce, Mary Elizabeth Bellows., Greg McClure, Elizabeth Daigle, Tina Heafner, and Brandon Fox, "Is Rosa Still Tired? Revisiting Kohl's Myths in Contemporary Picture Books," *American Educational History Journal* 41, no. 2 (2014): 411–429.
6. John H. Bickford III, "Accessing and Addressing Historical Misrepresentations within Children's Literature about the Civil Rights Movement," *The History Teacher* 48, no. 4 (August 2015): 693–736.
7. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
8. Richard Wormser, *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003).
9. Stetson Kennedy, *Jim Crow Guide to the U.S.A.* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974), 178.
10. Kathleen Franz, "The Open Road': Automobility and Racial Uplift in the Interwar Years," in *Technology and the African-American Experience*, Bruce Sinclair, ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004): 132.
11. Kennedy.
12. James Loewen, *Sundown Towns* (New York, The New Press, 2005).
13. Kennedy, 221.
14. Kennedy, 180.
15. Mildred Taylor, *The Gold Cadillac* (New York: Dial Books, 1987).
16. Calvin Alexander Ramsey, *Ruth and the Green Book* (Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, 2010).
17. Steven S. Lapham and Calvin Alexander Ramsey, "The Green Book: Finding Safe Passage in Jim Crow America," *Middle Level Learning* (September 2014): 14–16.
18. *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/the-green-book.
19. Janice N. Harrington, *Going North* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004).
20. Christopher Paul Curtis, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1995).
21. Eric Chandler Groce, Tina L. Heafner, and Margaret Norville Gregor, "Jim Crow Riding Shotgun: Navigating Racial Discrimination in America," *Middle Level Learning* 66 (September 2019) 1318.

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## Resources for Teacher Content Knowledge and Classroom Use

American Public Media; primary source accounts, including two brief transportation stories from Ann Jacobs at the end of the feature. <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/remembering/public.html>

Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Michigan. Origins of Jim Crow, <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/origins.htm>. See especially the examples of Jim Crow laws from 16 states, including several about transportation (Alabama, Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia) and eating (Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina). <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/links/mismlink/examples.htm>

Library of Congress. Teacher's Guide and multiple primary resources including interview with Gwendolyn Patton (46:55-48:55 contains story about public transportation). <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/civil-rights/>

National Park Service — Jim Crow laws including examples about lunch counters, railroads, restaurants, and buses. [https://www.nps.gov/malu/learn/education/jim\\_crow\\_laws.htm](https://www.nps.gov/malu/learn/education/jim_crow_laws.htm)

New York Public Library's Digital Collection of the Negro Motorist Green Books; students could research one of the editions to determine the availability of restaurants, hotels, and other businesses in their area that were willing to serve black visitors, or could plan a trip between two points and determine the relative difficulty black families might have encountered. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/the-green-book#/?tab=about&scroll=6>

Smithsonian National Museum of American History; Jim Crow signs - several for segregated transportation. <http://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/1-segregated/detail/jim-crow-signs.html>