

WALKING TO THE BUS-RIDER BLUES

By Harriette Gillem Robinet

Summary

In June 1956, the bus boycott has been in full swing for six months in Montgomery Alabama. Sparked by the arrest of Rosa Parks for refusing to give up her seat to a white man, the African American community refuses to ride the busses. Alfa Merryfield, his sister Zinnia and his great-grandmother, Mama Merryfield are scraping by through Alfa's job at the grocery store and Mama's job cleaning houses. Alfa faces challenges that include three white boys who delight in beating him up, the mysterious disappearance of the rent money, and the desire to follow the non-violent principles of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As the novel continues, Alfa figures out the mystery, finds ways to deal with the bullies in his life, and finds out about his family's past. In the end, we see that Alfa Merryfield will most likely achieve all his dreams through his determination and his willingness to find solutions to life's ups and downs.

Questions for discussion

*"Oh, I'm singing the bus-rider blues,
The Alabama bus-rider blues.
I got me a feeling, deep down inside,
It ain't never gonna be the same."*

1. Why does Alfa sing his song? Have you ever written a song, a poem or a phrase to comfort or empower you at tough times?
2. Alfa lovingly says that Mama Merryfield is confused in the head. How do he and Zinnia help her? Do you know anyone who gets confused the way she does?
3. "Walk the walk and talk the talk in the manner of love." "Win them over, don't win over them." What do you think those words mean? How do you see yourself using those ideas in your life?
4. Have you ever had to face bullies? Why do you think knowing the boys' names was such a powerful "weapon" for Alfa? What do you think of the solutions that Alfa comes up with?
5. Imagine that your town is in the middle of a bus boycott. Think about what your daily routine is and all the places you go to from day to day. How long does it take you to get to school by bus? How many miles would that be? What would it be like to have to walk everywhere? If you can get a map of your town, you could use a highlighter to follow your typical daily trips.

6. The African American community really looked out for each other with those who own cars giving rides to older folks if they have a chance. What other things did the people of Montgomery do for each other? What kinds of things do people in your community do for each other?
7. Mrs. Williams accuses Alfa, Mama and Zinnia of stealing a large amount of money from her. Why was it so scary for Alfa to go to the police station. Who was Emmett Till? What would it be like to fear for your life in a place where people have been murdered just for the color of their skin?
8. Officer Newton is an interesting character because he thinks “outside the box” at a time when many did not. He accuses Alfa of stealing the money and then ends up helping all of the Merryfields. What do you think of him? How about Mr. Greenfield? He seems to be encouraging Alfa to stand up for himself, but then he fires Alfa when the police come to talk to him.
9. What do you think will happen to Alfa and Zinnia as they grow up?

Topics for further discussions and research

Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Emmett Till

Discrimination in the South

De-segregation of the schools.

The state of Alabama including a map and pictures of the terrain and cities

The Civil Rights Movement

The National Civil Rights Museum