

16 **Extraordinary** African Americans

Second Edition

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To the Teacher

According to *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*, a report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York (2004, second edition), “High-interest, low-difficulty texts play a significant role in an adolescent literacy program and are critical for fostering the reading skills of struggling readers and the engagement of all students. In addition to using appropriate grade-level textbooks that may already be available in the classroom, it is crucial to have a range of texts in the classroom that link to multiple ability levels and connect to students’ background experiences.”

Biographies about extraordinary people are examples of one such kind of text. The 16 Americans described in this collection should both inspire and reassure students. As students read, your instruction can include approaches that will support not only comprehension, but also learning from passages.

Reading and language arts skills not only enrich students’ academic lives but also their personal lives. The *Extraordinary Americans* series was written to help students gain confidence as readers. The biographies were written to pique students’ interest while engaging their understanding of vocabulary, recalling facts, identifying the main idea, drawing conclusions, and applying knowledge. The added value of reading these biographies is that students will learn about other people and, perhaps, about themselves.

Students will read stories demonstrating that great things are accomplished by everyday people who may have grown up just like them—or maybe even with greater obstacles to overcome. Students will discover that being open to new ideas, working hard, and believing in one’s self make them extraordinary people, too!

Structure of the Book

The Biographies

The collection of stories can be used in many different ways. You may assign passages for independent reading or engage students in choral reading. No matter which strategies you use, each passage contains pages to guide your instruction.

At the end of each passage, you will find a series of questions. The questions are categorized, and you can assign as many as you wish. The purposes of the questions vary:

- **Remembering the Facts:** Questions in this section engage students in a direct comprehension strategy, and require them to recall and find information while keeping track of their own understanding.
- **Understanding the Story:** Questions posed in this section require a higher level of thinking. Students are asked to draw conclusions and make inferences.
- **Getting the Main Idea:** Once again, students are able to stretch their thinking. Questions in this section are fodder for dialog and discussion around the extraordinary individuals and an important point in their lives.
- **Applying What You've Learned:** Proficient readers internalize and use the knowledge that they gain after reading. The question or activity posed allows for students to connect what they have read to their own lives.

In the latter part of the book, there are additional resources to support your instruction.

Vocabulary

A list of key words is included for each biography. The lists can be used in many ways. Assign words for students to define, use them for spelling lessons, and so forth.

Answer Key

An answer key is provided. Responses will likely vary for Getting the Main Idea and Applying What You've Learned questions.

Additional Activities

Extend and enhance students' learning! These suggestions include conducting research, creating visual art, exploring cross-curricular activities, and more.

References

Learn more about each extraordinary person or assign students to discover more on their own. Start with the sources provided.

To the Student

“When the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say, ‘There lived a great people—a black people—who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.’”

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The lives of many African Americans have made a difference in the story of America. Writers, artists, scientists, teachers, politicians, ministers, lawyers, doctors, businesspeople, athletes, and so many more, have helped to make America what it is today. African Americans can be proud of their heritage. It is a pride all Americans should share.

In this book, you will read the stories of sixteen of these people:

- Sojourner Truth, a six-foot-tall traveling preacher whose powerful sermons showed many people that slavery was wrong
- Frederick Douglass, who called for an end to slavery
- Harriet Tubman, who led hundreds of slaves to freedom
- Ida B. Wells-Barnett, whose newspaper stories helped put an end to lynchings in the South
- Mary McLeod Bethune, who gave thousands of black children a chance for an education
- Booker T. Washington, who founded the Tuskegee Institute
- W.E.B. DuBois, who founded the NAACP and began the modern civil rights movement
- George Washington Carver, who found hundreds of uses for the peanut and turned agriculture around in the South

- Jackie Robinson, who broke the color barrier in professional baseball
- Thurgood Marshall, who became the first black Supreme Court justice
- Rosa Parks, whose simple actions began the civil rights movement
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose vision of nonviolence brought about giant strides for the civil rights movement
- Malcolm X, a militant who opposed Dr. King's views
- Jesse Jackson, who has become the leading black politician of our day
- Maya Angelou, poet laureate, who gives us an inspiring and optimistic view of our future
- Toni Morrison, an author who won the Nobel Prize for Literature

The motto on the Great Seal of the United States reads “E PLURIBUS UNUM.” That is Latin for “Out of many, one.” The United States is made up of many peoples of many races. These peoples have come together to form one nation. Each group has been an important part of American history. I hope you will enjoy reading about sixteen African Americans who have made a difference.

—Nancy Lobb

Toni Morrison

Author

The Nobel Prize for Literature is the most important writing award in the world. Toni Morrison was the first black woman to win it. The prize that year was worth \$825,000. But more important to Morrison was the fact that she was now known around the world as a great writer.

Toni Morrison was born as Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931. She was the second of four children. She grew up in Lorain, Ohio. Lorain is a small factory town 25 miles west of Cleveland.



Chloe's father worked hard to support his family. Sometimes he worked three jobs at a time. His best job was as a shipyard welder. He took great pride in his work. If he welded a seam perfectly, he signed it. No one would ever see his name, but he would know it was there. From her father, Chloe learned how important it was to work hard and pay attention to details.

The Woffords were a close-knit family. The things they enjoyed most were reading and telling stories. Chloe especially loved her father's stories. He told of Uncle Remus, ghosts, magic, and the supernatural. These stories sparked young Chloe's imagination. When Chloe entered first grade, she was the only black in her class. She was also the only child who could read.

Chloe graduated from high school with honors. She went on to Howard University, a black college. Chloe found that her English professors taught only the works of white authors and ignored black writers.

Chloe had already read the books included in her courses. She was bored with campus social life. Her classmates seemed only interested in clothes and parties. She found that her classmates couldn't even say her name right. So she started using a short form of her middle name: Toni.

Toni joined an acting group called the Howard University Players. The Players put on plays throughout the Southern states. By traveling with this group, Toni got a chance to see people and places different from those she knew. She learned about racism and how it affected black people. She found that it affected white people as well. Later she would use things she learned on these trips in her writing.

Toni earned a bachelor's degree in English from Howard. In 1955, she got her master's degree in English from Cornell. She met Harold Morrison. They were married a year later. Now her name was Toni Morrison. Toni and her husband had two sons. But their marriage was not a happy one. It ended in divorce.

In 1965, Random House Publisher in New York hired Toni as an editor. She moved there with her two small sons. Every night as her sons slept, Toni wrote. At first it was just something to do. Soon it became more important to her than her paying job. She later said, "Writing became the one thing I had no intention of living without."

In 1967, Toni became a senior editor at Random House. She began editing books by famous black writers. She helped them get published. She brought a number of black authors into the mainstream of American literature.

At the same time, she kept working on her own book. When it was finished, she sent it to many publishers. In 1970, *The Bluest Eye* was published. It did not sell many copies. But the reviewers agreed that it was an amazing first novel. *The Bluest Eye* tells the story of a young black girl who believes that all her problems would go away if only she had blue eyes.

Toni wrote her next book in her head on her daily subway ride. *Sula*, the story of the friendship of two black women, was published in 1975. *Sula* got good reviews. But it did not sell many copies. So Toni decided not to write another novel.

She had an idea for a book about African-American history. It was a scrapbook that would cover 300 years of black history. It included old newspaper stories and photos. It had lyrics to songs and old stories. It had records from the patent office and ads. *The Black Book* was published in 1974.

In 1977, her third novel, *Song of Solomon*, was published. The book won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977. It sold many copies. With the money she made from the book, Toni bought a house on the Hudson River in New York. She worked at Random House only one day a week. She spent the rest of her time writing.

Toni spent four and a half years writing her fourth novel, *Tar Baby*. It was based on the old Uncle Remus tale of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby. In the book, she talked about the conflicts between the races. *Tar Baby* received mixed reviews. But it made the *New York Times* best seller list.

Toni wanted to write her next novel about slavery. She had seen an 1856 newspaper story that gave her the idea for a novel. The article told the story of an escaped slave named Margaret Garner. When her owner found her, Margaret killed her daughter Beloved rather than allowing her to return to slavery. The dead child was reincarnated (reborn) in the body of a young woman. Beloved shared her memories and those who lived before her. She shared the stories of Africans who died on the slave ships coming to America.

Beloved was a best seller. Toni's powerful writing showed the horror of the slaves' lives. For the first time, many people realized just how horrible slavery really was. In 1988, Toni received the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved*. In May 2006, *The New York Times* Book Review named *Beloved* the best American novel written in the previous 25 years.

But Toni felt that *Beloved* told only part of the story she wanted to tell. Two more books would be needed to finish it. These books were *Jazz* (1992) and *Paradise* (1998).

On October 7, 1993, Toni learned that she had won the 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature. She was only the eleventh American to do so, and the first African-American. The Swedish Academy, which gives the prize, praised Toni's six novels for their "epic power." They spoke of her "ear for dialogue and richly expressive depictions of black America."

Toni expressed her thanks. "I am (so) happy. But what is most wonderful for me is to know that the prize at last has been awarded to an African American." Two months later, Morrison traveled to Stockholm, Sweden, to accept the prize. She hoped that her success would inspire other young black writers.

Today, Toni Morrison continues her writing. In 2003, *Love* was published. And she has also published a number of children's books with her son, Slade Morrison.

Toni Morrison is known around the world. She has received countless awards and has become wealthy from her work. But fame and money were never her goals. She once said, "There's a difference between writing for a living and writing for life." She writes because she could not live without writing.

Remembering the Facts

1. What is the name of the important writing award Toni Morrison won in 1993?
2. How did Toni get her love of telling stories?
3. Why was Toni not satisfied with her English courses at Howard?
4. Explain two ways the Howard University Players expanded Toni's horizons.
5. How did Toni use her position as an editor at Random House to help other black writers?
6. What is *Beloved* about?
7. Name the two books that completed the story Toni began in *Beloved*.

Understanding the Story

8. Why do you think *The New York Times* Book Review named *Beloved* the best American novel written in the previous 25 years?

9. What do you think Toni meant when she said, “There’s a difference between writing for a living and writing for life.”

10. The library in Lorain, Ohio, recently dedicated a Toni Morrison Reading Room. Why do you think this is such a fitting honor for Toni?

Getting the Main Idea

Why do you think that Toni Morrison is an important part of American history?

Applying What You’ve Learned

Toni Morrison once said, “If you study the culture and art of African Americans, you are not studying a . . . minor culture. What you are studying is America.” What do you think she meant?