

# A Teacher's Guide for *My Selma*

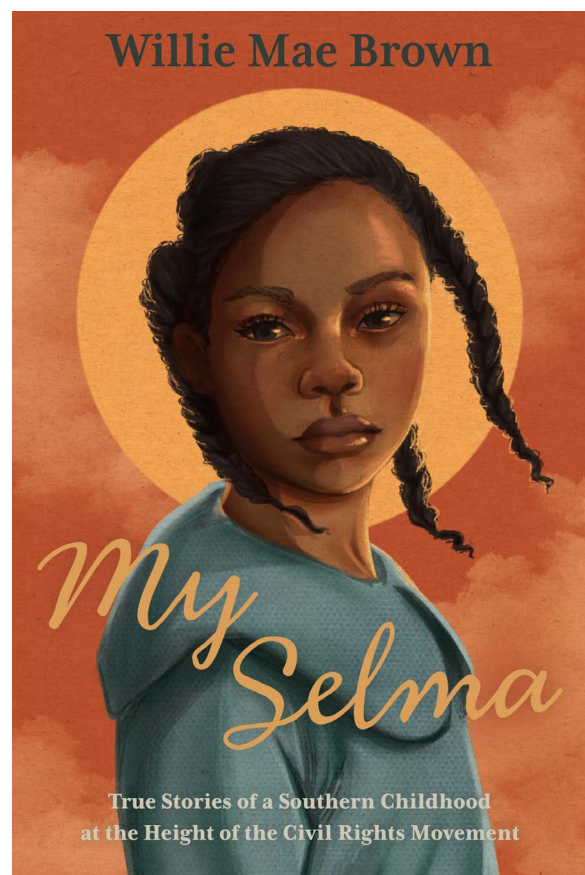


## ABOUT THE BOOK

*Combining family stories of the everyday and the extraordinary as seen through the eyes of her twelve-year-old self, Willie Mae Brown gives readers an unforgettable portrayal of her coming of age in a town at the crossroads of history.*

As the civil rights movement and the fight for voter rights unfold in Selma, Alabama, many things happen inside and outside the Brown family's home that do not have anything to do with the landmark 1965 march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Yet the famous outrages which unfold on that span form an inescapable backdrop in this collection of stories. In one, Willie Mae takes it upon herself to offer summer babysitting services to a glamorous single white mother—a secret she keeps from her parents that unravels with shocking results. In another, Willie Mae reluctantly joins her mother at a church rally, and is forever changed after hearing Martin Luther King Jr. deliver a defiant speech in spite of a court injunction.

Infused with the vernacular of her Southern upbringing, *My Selma* captures the voice and vision of a fascinating young person—perspicacious, impetuous, resourceful, and even mystical in her ways of seeing the world around her—who gifts us with a loving portrayal of her hometown while also delivering a no-holds-barred indictment of the time and place.



Ages 10–14

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Willie Mae Brown, aka Hundey, is a deep-thinking, perceptive, insightful young woman living in Selma, Alabama in the mid-1960s. With her new memoir, *My Selma: True Stories of a Southern Childhood at the Height of the Civil Rights Movement*, Brown tells the story of her upbringing in a time when the South was segregated and volatile for African Americans. Through the voice of her twelve-year-old self, Brown shares daily events that shaped her memories and molded her understanding of the injustices and hatred that existed in the hometown that she loved so much. In her memoir, Brown immerses her readers in the fear and uncertainties that the southern Black community experienced regularly. Despite these many abuses and cruelties, her memories of Selma are beautiful and filled with joy, love, and admiration for the people, for the locales she frequented, and for her family and home. It is a story that teaches young readers today of the past, with the hope of changing the world of the future.



*My Selma* is an essential book for middle grade readers. Its unique approach to teaching history through the eyes of a twelve-year-old girl and to highlighting how people in real time responded to that history is powerful. The stories offer a dual opportunity for social emotional learning as well as for exploring historical context. Readers will not only read about the past, but analyze it through the eyes of a peer – a child on the verge of adulthood, just like them. This type of immersion into the past is how we can contemplate the future we would like to have.

# Essential Questions

## BEFORE YOU READ

- What is a memoir? What are the elements of a memoir? Why is this type of writing engaging for readers?
- Discuss your knowledge of America in the mid-1960s. What is your understanding of the climate in the South during this era? Create a list of questions that may need answering before reading the book.
- What is a primary source? Why is it important to utilize them as you read a memoir?

## WHILE YOU READ

- Describe the Brown family. Who are they? Where do they live? What joys do they experience? What struggles? What are the important details about the family that shape Brown's upbringing?
- Discuss examples of cause and effect throughout the story. How does one person's actions affect another?
- Locate parts of the story that the reader must infer to fully understand what is happening. How does Brown's perspective affect the details that the reader explicitly learns?
- Identify the major historical events that take place in Selma during Brown's childhood. Which events is she present for? For which events is she on the outskirts? How does this impact her understanding of each event?

## AFTER YOU READ

- What was the author's purpose for sharing this memoir? In your opinion, what was most impactful? What stuck with you as you read Brown's story?
- Discuss the format of *My Selma*. What are some of the literary tools (e.g., imagery, diction, etc.) woven throughout the book and where do you see them in the book? What effects do they have on readers? Why do you think Brown writes her memoir this way?
- Describe the author's voice in her memoir. What is an author's tone? How would you describe Brown's tone? How does Brown create the voice of a child even though she was an adult when she wrote about her life stories? How does this impact your understanding of the events that shaped her life?
- What questions do you still have after reading Brown's story? What are the best sources to get your questions answered?

# Vocabulary

*My Selma* includes a variety of vocabulary words that readers may need to become familiar with prior to, during, and after reading. It includes phrases and dialects that are authentic to the time and place. Discuss with readers the impact that words have as you delve into the list below. As readers move through the pages, they may also add words of importance to the list.

- Sharecroppers
- KKK
- Pettis Bridge
- Bloody Sunday
- Nonviolent protests
- Agitator
- Strawboss
- Dialect
- Dehumanization
- Measles
- Haints
- John Lewis
- Bill Connor
- Viola Liuzzo
- Meningitis

Discuss the use of the carefully chosen vocabulary in this memoir. Each word holds important meaning in the story, some literal, some metaphorical. Dig into Brown's memoir to understand the meaning and context of each word.

# Activities

## Before You Read

### THE POWER OF PRIMARY SOURCES

Brown wrote a memoir that describes historical context through her own lived experiences. A memoir is written as a firsthand account so it is considered a primary source. What are other examples of primary sources? How does a primary source differ from a secondary source? What are examples of secondary sources? How can readers use both primary and secondary sources to learn more about the past and enrich their reading? Pairing other primary sources with Brown's story is helpful for understanding the whole picture of what was happening in Selma. Discuss all of these ideas before you begin this powerful activity.

*Teacher Resource :*

*Use this resource to help you guide readers as they discover primary sources and to assist them in gathering the most information from them.*

<https://www.loc.gov/programs/teachers/getting-started-with-primary-sources/>

Dig into primary sources from Selma, Alabama in the 1960s. The links below provide primary sources that can help you and your students build background knowledge and give you some context as you read about Brown's experiences. Encourage readers to jot facts and ideas about what they have gathered from the primary sources. As the exploration happens, steer readers to gather the following information for each source:

- Who? Who (or what) is the source about?
- What? What event or idea does the source include?
- Where? Where does the event or idea happen?
- When? When did the event take place or what is the time frame of the source?
- Whoa! What was the most surprising or interesting information that was gathered from the source?

These are a great starting point, but discovering your own primary sources can also be meaningful!

Before beginning the experience of digging through the past through primary sources, be mindful of the content that young readers will come across. The links below include images of violence, profanity, as well as the raw accounts of the injustices that were common in Selma, Alabama in the 1960s. Preparing students and their caretakers for the content may be an important first step in this activity.

[Photos and Letters from Selma, Alabama](#)

[Interview with John Lewis](#)

[Interview with Amelia Boynton Robinson](#)

[Selma Support Leaflet](#)

[News Account of Blood Sunday](#)

[Freedom Day Flyer](#)

[Video with Original Photos](#)

Now that you've immersed yourself in Selma, Alabama during the 1960s, it's time to share what you learned. Allow time to share what was learned from the primary sources. Here's one way to support the collaborative process and ensure all voices are heard:

**INSIDE-OUTSIDE CIRCLE:** This discussion technique is an engaging, interactive way for readers to share their knowledge and ideas with each other. After information has been gathered from the primary sources, create the circles. Readers will share from the list of items above (Who, What, Where, When, Whoa!). Circulate while students are interacting and continue to keep them on track of the 5 Ws.

- Pair readers (student choice or teacher choice).
- Have one person from each partner pair form a circle and face outward.
- The rest of the students face their partner inward. This forms the outside circle.
- Announce which circle is the listening circle and which one is the talking circle. This can be switched throughout the activity.
- Give time for the partners to talk and listen, then rotate the outside circle clockwise.
- Keep repeating this process as many times as you like. This can also be done with specific questions for each rotation.

Once the circles are complete, gather as a large group to wrap up the discussion. Ask how these particular primary sources specifically helped us feel more connected to Selma in the 1960s? Discuss if students noticed any biases or stereotypes. For what purpose were the different primary sources created?

# While You Read

## THE SENSES OF SELMA

Twelve-year-old Willie Mae Brown relies heavily on her five senses to fully experience the world around her. She sees, hears, smells, touches, and feels love, family, bravery, and inspiration. Her senses detect both the good and beautiful, but also the hate, discrimination, and fear.

*My Selma was a place that emitted the rich, clean odor of black dirt and sour clay, that smelled of sage pork sausages, ham, and biscuits, the breakfast scents all blowing through the dew-covered Johnson grass and across foggy highways at five a.m. on any morning (Chapter 1, page 3).*

Locate other specific examples in Brown's memoir that highlight how she uses her senses to vividly describe her experiences.

Now activate *your* senses and experience the world around *you*! There are two paths you can take in this exercise. Choose what fits you best.

- **A Significant Life Event** – Think of an event in your life that has great significance. It can be a positive memory or a difficult time in your past. Take time to recall the event and awaken your senses to all of the elements as they occurred. Try closing your eyes and visualizing yourself in that moment. Use the worksheet below to track each sense as you remember it.
- **A Mindful Moment** – If a memory is not your best bet, live in the moment of now! Choose a setting that will offer a variety of elements. You could sit in a park, walk in the woods or on the sidewalk, check out a performance, or simply sit in the kitchen with a family member while they prepare dinner. Be mindful of your surroundings and soak it in. Use the worksheet below to track each sense as you experience it.

Activate your artistic self and create a presentation that shows off what you sensed in this exercise. Make a collage, a painting, a song, rap, or poem. This wrap up is sure to continue your tour of the senses!

## TIMELINE

As readers embark on the Brown family's journey through the summer of 1965, encourage them to take note of the events. The story is told through Brown's perspective, but exists during a notable time in Selma, Alabama.

Create two timelines. One timeline will be a journey through each vignette as Brown experiences the world around her. The other timeline will be of the historic events that take place that year. Place the timelines next to each other and follow the journey big and small.

Take these steps to complete the task:

- **Brown's timeline** – Write a 1-2 sentence summary of each vignette in the memoir. If there is a date or clue as to when the event in Brown's life took place, include it in the description. Readers may have to exercise their inference muscles in order to complete this timeline.
- **Historical timeline** – Use information and clues from the book to establish a timeline of the current events that took place alongside Brown's stories. Include Martin Luther King, Jr., Bloody Sunday, protests and conflicts regarding voting rights and other events you want to include. Refer to the primary sources that were previously explored to help establish this historical timeline.

Compare the two timelines and discuss how they line up. What can readers learn from this exercise? Does it answer questions for the reader? What new questions are generated from this comparison? To challenge readers further, task them with creating their timelines in an imaginative, image-filled, visual way that portrays the twisty-turny overlaps between Brown's life experiences and the major events in Selma.

## VISUALIZING VIGNETTES

A vignette is defined as a short, descriptive literary sketch or a brief incident or scene ([Merriam Webster](#)). *My Selma* is a collection of carefully written vignettes that include illustrative descriptions of Brown's summer when she was twelve years old. She weaves the typical happiness and fun of being a child in a loving family with the injustices that existed in the South in the mid-1960s. Vignettes are powerful, small stories that paint a bigger picture. They step away from this bigger picture and zoom in on a particular situation so the reader can build their understanding. Vignettes can be a compelling writing choice.

Use an essential question or idea as the springboard for writing one vignette. It can be from your life or you could step outside of your life and think about someone else's. This can be done by choosing a person that you know a lot about, a photograph, or even an imagined character. Choose to write about real life or stretch your imagination. Both will launch you into an expressive vignette.

Here are some questions and ideas that may spark deep thinking and reflection.



### *Write about your own life:*

- Have you ever been involved in an injustice?
- Write about a time that you witnessed something that you thought was unfair.
- Tell about a time that you experienced pure joy.
- What is the strongest memory you have from your childhood?

OR

### *Write about someone's else's life:*

- Has the character been involved in an injustice? Tell that story.
- Has the character witnessed something unfair? How did they respond?
- Tell about a time that the character experienced pure joy. How did they express their joy?
- Describe a clear scene that would create a strong, childhood memory. It could be a happy or a challenging event.

Brown began her memoir by writing vignettes on scraps of paper. Begin your process using whatever medium sparks thought and creativity and see where it takes you. Perhaps your work will also help change the world, or simply bring inspiration to one person who reads it.

## *After You Read*

### **MY MINI-MEMOIR**

As readers come to the end of Brown's memoir, they can continue thinking of their own memories and stories. Return to some of the activities they participated in and the ideas they have been developing throughout the reading of the book. In this final, culminating activity, *The Power of Primary Sources*, *The Senses of Selma*, and *Visualizing Vignettes* all come together for students to write their own mini-memoir. Like Brown skillfully does throughout *My Selma*, in writing their memoir, readers will zoom in on events that have somehow shaped their lives. This culminating experience is a perfect ending to a unit about personal identity, social injustice, or the Civil Rights Movement. Connecting our stories to today's world is impactful and important.

Before embarking on your memoir journey, listen to this interview with Wille Mae Brown. She describes in her own words the ideas behind her book and the inspiration that drives her story.

#### [Podcast Interview: Willie Mae Brown](#)

She describes the title of her memoir, *My Selma*, as the essence of how she saw Selma, Alabama during her childhood. She wants to preserve her memories and the history of her past as she saw it. She doesn't

want people to forget what living there was like in the mid-1960s. She takes ownership of her account of Selma and feels that wherever YOU live and however YOU experience it, is YOUR story, through YOUR eyes. Tell the story of YOU!

What is *your* story? Where does your story take place? What are some of the social current events that are woven throughout your story? Put pen to paper and start writing your memoir. Include the following elements:

- **Major Events** from your life (Choose 3 events that were impactful to you. You get to choose what you're comfortable sharing. This is your story to tell and you have complete control over what you would like to share and what you do not want to share.)
- **Detailed Descriptions** of your events (Activate your 5 senses!)
- **Artifacts and Evidence** (Use your own primary sources such as photos, videos, certificates, texts, trophies, medals, hospital bracelet, newspaper clips, stuffed animal, a writing piece, etc.)

How you present your memoir can be as unique as you are! Willie Mae Brown shares her story through carefully written vignettes. You can follow her lead or choose your own approach. Make a scrapbook, create a [Storycorps](#) recording, a map, a slideshow, a short film, a miniature or model of a place or event, a collection of poems, artwork, or an essay. The choice is yours. The goal is simple: Help your audience experience YOUR story.

This teaching guide was written by Room 228 Educational Consulting, with public-school teacher Shannon Rheault as lead educator and Tracei Willis and Cortney Brandwein as educator consultants. We at Room 228 believe our unique stories and lived experiences inform our present. To learn more, visit [rm228.com](http://rm228.com).

# THE SENSES OF SELMA

Organize your thoughts as you activate your senses. Begin by revisiting the senses that Brown brings to her writing, then stretch your own senses in your own thoughts.

- Search for examples in the book that activate your senses.

5 SENSES	Locate examples of the senses from <i>My Selma</i> and write them below.
SEE	“His face was brown and smooth, and the collar on his white shirt was whiter than the ones we soaked in lye soap for Dah” (page 170).
HEAR	
SMELL	
TASTE	
FEEL	

- Now take your senses for a spin! Think of a time (real or imagined) where your senses can run wild. Use the organizer below to jot down details, then write a paragraph describing your memory or mindful moment. The reader will be amazed by the vividness of your description!

## REAL OR IMAGINED MEMORY OR MINDFUL MOMENT:

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5 SENSES	Write how each sense appears in your memory or imagination.
SEE	
HEAR	
SMELL	
TASTE	
FEEL	

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