

Jane Addams Peace Association
Learn and Do Reading Guide

CHOOSING BRAVE:

HOW MAMIE TILL-MOBLEY AND EMMETT TILL SPARKED THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

by Angela Joy | Illustrated by Janelle Washington

2023 JANE ADDAMS CHILDREN'S BOOK AWARD, BOOKS FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN

This Learn and Do Reading Guide is intended to help teachers, librarians, and family members facilitate important, genuine reflection, dialogue, and inspiration for action among young people as they read this commended title together or on their own.

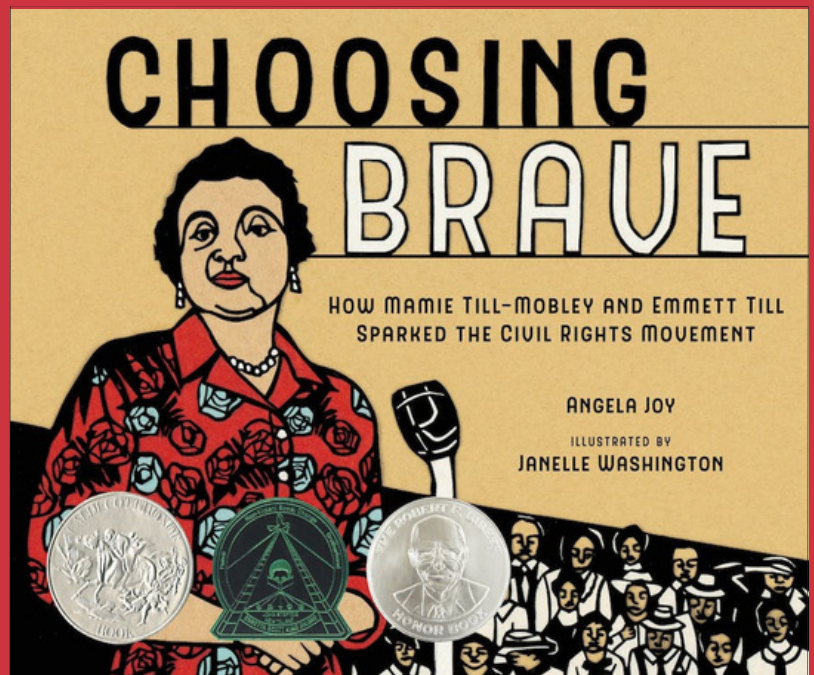
If the adult is reading aloud, the commentary can be shared and the questions posed as seems fit in the process. If young people are reading independently, Building Background and Reflection can be discussed with an adult before and after reading. Dialogue Questions could be assigned for written consideration while reading, with discussion afterward. All or just a few prompts and questions can be utilized. In all cases, conversation about the book is key.

In a group setting, children can be asked to turn to someone nearby to consider a question before several young people share with the whole group. It is so important that young people share their own perspective and learn about others' as well. Here are some useful sentence starters for students extending each other's thinking: "When you said . . . I thought/wondered . . .," "Before I read this I thought . . . now I think . . .," "This makes me feel . . . because . . ."

For more information see our [**Learn & Do Curriculum Guidelines.**](#)

The [**Jane Addams Children's Book Award**](#) annually recognizes children's books of literary and aesthetic excellence that effectively engage children in thinking about peace, social justice, global community, and equity for all people.

Jane Addams wrote, "Peace would no longer be an absence of war, but the unfolding of worldwide processes making for the nurture of human life." She saw the fostering of "sympathetic knowledge" as the building block of peace. (Newer Ideals of Peace - 1907). In modern terms, the award criteria asks, "How can people work with compassion, empathy, and activism to advance Jane Addams's belief that achieving true peace means more than ending war; it means ensuring justice for all people?" "Sympathetic knowledge," compassion, empathy, and activism are the distinguishing features of peace-building that we seek to emphasize in our reading guides.



BEFORE READING

ADULTS

- *Choosing Brave* is first and foremost Mamie Till-Mobley's story. The trauma and tragedy of the murder of her son, Emmett, is central to Mamie's story and told here with care for young readers' emotional safety. Reading the author's and illustrator's notes and other information in the back of the book, as well as pre-viewing the story itself with awareness of your own reactions and questions, will prepare you to share this book with younger readers. In light of the inferred violence within the story, plan for how you will provide a safe place for processing feelings that may arise for children, especially those who have experienced racialized violence within their communities and for those who are sensitive to news of violence in the media. All children will need attentive support. Encourage empathy and questioning
- Give the vocabulary section in the back of the book careful consideration: buffalo nickel, Emmett Till Players, the Great Migration, iceman/milkman, Jim Crow, juke joint, lynching, MoonPie, Mothers of the Movement, NAACP, polio, profane, stutter. Given the knowledge of the child or children with whom you are sharing *Choosing Brave*, are there concepts you wish to discuss before reading or will you incorporate them in discussion as needed during and after reading?

YOUNG READERS

- Before you begin, take a picture walk! Look at each spread in order. What are you noticing about the story through the artwork before you begin reading the words?
- Read the front flap of the book jacket. Notice what makes sense and what does not. What are you wondering? Are you wondering about the meaning of some of the words or ideas that may be unfamiliar to you? Maybe some of your questions can be answered by others you are reading with or maybe you'll need to hold off for now and see what you learn and what other questions you have after reading the story.
- Before you begin, take a picture walk! Look at each spread in order. What are you noticing about the story through the artwork before you begin reading the words?
- On the back of this book, Mamie is quoted saying, "Let the people see what I have seen. We have averted our eyes far too long. Everybody needs to know what happened to Emmett Till." Averted means "to turn away." Maybe you already know that Emmett was murdered. But why and how? This book will give you some idea of what happened. You will find yourself inferring, or guessing, and you will have questions. That's just as it should be. Read to understand and be ready to search for answers to your questions!

FIRST SPREAD:

August 31, 1955

Scene on the riverbank

BUILDING BACKGROUND

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT, WHAT CAN BE LEARNED GOING IN?

- This first spread sets the stage for Mamie's story by giving us a picture of what occurred three days after Emmett's murder when his body was finally found.

DIALOGUE

LEAVE SPACE FOR CONVERSATION AND DISCUSSION.

- How do the colors of sky and water along with the silhouettes of men, trees, river, and land connect with the first words in the book?
- What mood does the combination of words and picture stir in you?
- What questions do you have?
- What do you find yourself inferring or reading between the lines?

REFLECT

DEEPER DIVE OR LOOKING AS A WHOLE: HOW DOES THIS CHANGE HOW YOU FEEL AND WHAT YOU THINK?

- If you've been reading in your head, try reading the words out loud. If you read out loud, try reading a second time, listening to the sound and rhythm of the words. Does doing so change your understanding? Try this as you read through the rest of the story.

SPREADS 2–5

Up from Mississippi through Mamie’s graduation

BUILDING BACKGROUND

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT, WHAT CAN BE LEARNED GOING IN?

- These four spreads convey the flavor and reality of Mamie’s first years.
- Jim Crow laws in the South and the Great Migration north shaped Mamie’s family’s experience. What do you already know about these things? What do you wonder? (Both terms are explained in the vocabulary section in the back of the book. Juke joints are explained there too!)



Black Codes and Jim Crow Laws, National Geographic



The Great Migration, Studentsofhistory.com

DIALOGUE

LEAVE SPACE FOR CONVERSATION AND DISCUSSION.

- What are you imagining when you hear, “The sugar fluff of Mama’s meringue cut the bitterness of thick-spun stories/ all about Jim Crow”?
- How does it seem to you that Daddy, Mama, and Mamie each adjusted to their big move north?

REFLECT

DEEPER DIVE OR LOOKING AS A WHOLE: HOW DOES THIS CHANGE HOW YOU FEEL AND WHAT YOU THINK?

- “Hard” is used on almost every page of this section. What does “hard” mean to you and in the story so far?
- Look back at the pictures in this section as they express in color and in shape Mamie’s feelings and experience. How do you think she felt as she grew up?

SPREADS 6–9

From the soda fountain through Emmett on a tree swing.

BUILDING BACKGROUND

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT, WHAT CAN BE LEARNED GOING IN?

- As a young adult, Mamie meets up with expectations from the wider world about what she should and should not do. Notice how she responds.

DIALOGUE

LEAVE SPACE FOR CONVERSATION AND DISCUSSION.

- What was the “braver thing” Mamie chose on her outing for a banana split with the boxer Louis Till? What does this part of the story tell you about both of them?
- What do you understand about what happened between Louis and Mamie? What do you wish you understood?

REFLECT

DEEPER DIVE OR LOOKING AS A WHOLE: HOW DOES THIS CHANGE HOW YOU FEEL AND WHAT YOU THINK?

- In the 1940s children with disabilities were often institutionalized. This means they did not go home with their family but lived in an orphanage or hospital-like setting. This almost happened to Emmett, but Mamie refused and proved the doctors were wrong. Emmett grew up to be healthy and strong. Why do you think the author highlighted this?

SPREADS 10–14

Milkman arriving through Mamie waving to Emmett on the train

BUILDING BACKGROUND

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT, WHAT CAN BE LEARNED GOING IN?

- Polio is a scary illness that causes nerve damage. There is now a vaccine for it, but in the 1940s and early 1950s, many people were affected by polio. For Emmett the lasting symptom of polio was a stutter, repeating the initial sounds of some words as he tried to form them. (Learn more from the vocabulary section in the back of the book.)

DIALOGUE

LEAVE SPACE FOR CONVERSATION AND DISCUSSION.

- Though Emmett was a boy raised in a small Illinois town in the 1940s, how do you see yourself in him? Do you see other kids you know in him? Why and how?
- Why do you think taking a breath and whistling helped Emmett? Would it help you if you couldn't get your words out?
- Why was Emmett eager to go to the South for a visit? Why didn't Mamie think it was safe? Why do you think she let him go?

REFLECT

DEEPER DIVE OR LOOKING AS A WHOLE: HOW DOES THIS CHANGE HOW YOU FEEL AND WHAT YOU THINK?

- Look back at the pictures where Emmett and Mamie appear in the same spread. How are they connected and what does each picture cause you to think and feel about their connection?

SPREADS 15–18

Row boat in the river through Mamie and others with the casket.

BUILDING BACKGROUND

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT, WHAT CAN BE LEARNED GOING IN?

- This section is told from Mamie's perspective. We do not see the details of what happened to Emmett and must infer what we can.
- It was never clear just what Emmett did, something about a whistle that wasn't respectful of a white woman.



PBS American Experience

DIALOGUE

LEAVE SPACE FOR CONVERSATION AND DISCUSSION.

- It was several days before Mamie gets news. What does she learn? What can she be feeling?
- The image on the page that begins, "It started with a whistle" is of a sound wave. What do you understand about the meaning of words and images on this black page?
- Mamie said 'no' to burying Emmett in Mississippi. She insisted that she see his body. Why do you think the sheriff and the state of Mississippi wanted to hide Emmett's body from view?

REFLECT

DEEPER DIVE OR LOOKING AS A WHOLE: HOW DOES THIS CHANGE HOW YOU FEEL AND WHAT YOU THINK?

- The subtitle of this book is How Mamie Till-Mobley and Emmett Till Sparked the Civil Rights Movement. After being strong enough to see Emmett, “Mamie did the brave thing. She sounded the alarm.” Why do you think she wanted others to see how Emmett had been hurt? How might this kind of alarm spark a movement?

SPREADS 19–24

From Rosa Parks through to the final illustrated page

BUILDING BACKGROUND

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT, WHAT CAN BE LEARNED GOING IN?

- News of Emmett’s death and how badly he’d been hurt spread all over the country and world. Just three months later Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus, thinking of Emmett.
- Mamie participated in the Civil Rights Movement after Emmett was murdered.

DIALOGUE

LEAVE SPACE FOR CONVERSATION AND DISCUSSION.

- Though a movement had been ignited, injustice continued. Reread the page where Mamie Till-Mobley goes to the trial of Emmett’s murderers. There are many harsh shadows behind her. What do you think “a second murder mourned—the death of decency” might mean?
- As you read of Mamie’s life after Emmett died, what do you notice about the illustrations of her life? How do you think she feels on each of the pages?

REFLECT

DEEPER DIVE OR LOOKING AS A WHOLE: HOW DOES THIS CHANGE HOW YOU FEEL AND WHAT YOU THINK?

- If you could ask Mamie a question right now, what would it be?
- Reread Mamie’s words on the last illustrated page, “Let the people see what I have seen...” What were some consequences of what Mamie said for herself and for the world?
- What did doing “harder thing” and the “braver thing” mean for Mamie?

CALL TO ACTION

WHO DO YOU WANT TO TALK TO ABOUT THIS ISSUE OR TOPIC? WHY IS THIS BOOK IMPORTANT FOR KIDS TO READ OR HAVE READ TO THEM? WHO DO YOU WANT TO SHARE IT WITH?

- Who will you tell about this story? What do you want them to know? Why? What will you say to convince them to read it?
- After reading *Choosing Brave*, what do you wish were different in the world, both then and now? What laws and ways of interacting in today's world would you like to change? How might you contribute to those changes?
- Doing the "harder thing" and the "braver thing" started out with smaller everyday things for Mamie. When have you done the harder thing and the braver thing? Notice when you get a chance again and step up to the challenge. Notice when someone else does the harder thing and the braver thing and tell them you noticed.
- Read the poem that begins "Yet still today, we whisper her name." out loud. Memorize it and create a dramatic presentation for others in your family or community.
- Start your own Emmett Till Players. Memorize and perform speeches by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and others.
- Look at the names listed on the last illustrated page. They were all unjustly killed due to racialized violence, as Emmett was. Create a memorial for people you know who have suffered and who you wish to remember.

ADDITIONAL INQUIRY AND RESOURCES

THESE CAN BE USED TO BUILD FURTHER BACKGROUND AND/OR DEEPEN UNDERSTANDING WHO DO YOU WANT TO SHARE IT WITH?

- [Politics & Prose Book Store Live! Angela Joy & Janelle Washington on creating *Choosing Brave*](#)
- [How America Remembers Its Darkest Moments](#)
- Britannica: [Mamie Till-Mobley American educator and activist](#)
- [The Murder of Emmett Till: PBS The American Experience](#)
- The Playlist created by Angela Joy for *Choosing Brave*
- [Louis Armstrong - Black And Blue](#)
- [Two O'Clock Blues](#)
- [Big Bill Broonzy: Black, Brown and White](#)
- [Mother's Love](#)
- [City of New Orleans \(Willie Nelson\) w/ lyrics](#)
- [My Name is Emmett Till](#)
- [Mahalia Jackson - Take My Hand, Precious Lord \(Official Audio\)](#)
- [Ain' Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round](#)
- [The Death Of Emmett Till](#)
- [Sadie](#)

OTHER RELATED JANE ADDAMS CHILDREN'S BOOK AWARD HONORED TITLES

- [Ghost Boys](#) by Jewell Parker Rhodes
- [Heart and Soul: The Story of America & African Americans](#) by Kadir Nelson
- [Midnight Without a Moon](#) by Linda Williams Jackson
- [Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case](#) by Chris Crowe

Susan Freiss spent the heart of her career co-creating and teaching in a 4/5 multiage community within a public school. She currently creates curriculum and teaches middle school reading, writing, and higher order thinking part time. She has served on the Jane Addams Book Award Selection Committee and Peace Association Board. Susan lives in Madison, Wisconsin.