

EDUCATORS' GUIDE

# BLACK BIRDS IN THE SKY



AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

BRANDY COLBERT

## DEAR READER,

When I was a kid, I dreaded history class. Not just any history—American history. Black Americans were hardly present in my textbooks; I knew there was more to learn, but we always studied the same handful of people, the same handful of events, and only during Black History Month. I was in my mid-twenties, with a degree in journalism, when I began to educate myself on Black history—which is very much American history—and realized how empowered I felt by this knowledge.

Even so, I was still surprised a few years ago when I first heard about the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. Just three hours from where I grew up in Missouri, Tulsa was a town my family and I had visited several times, and one I'd always considered safe in an area of the country that didn't always feel so for Black people. How was I unaware of the destruction of the historic Greenwood District, a thriving neighborhood of Black business owners and professionals so successful in the early twentieth century that Booker T. Washington dubbed it "Black Wall Street"?

Because white Tulsans didn't want to discuss it. At the time, many were ashamed of what had happened, and even if they weren't, public officials had concerns that the violence of this devastating event would scare people away from Oklahoma, which had been a state for only fourteen years. And Black survivors of the massacre were sad, angry, and fearful of history repeating itself.

But eventually, people began to talk again. About the thousands of homes and businesses—almost forty city blocks—burned to the ground. About the thousands of innocent Black Tulsans taken prisoner as they watched an angry white mob murder their families and friends. About Dick Rowland and Sarah Page, the ambiguous pair at the center of this story who were all but forgotten as the violence, looting, and fires raged on.

Black American history is beautiful and horrific, full of progress and setbacks that have defined the story of the United States since its founding. But no matter how it looks, everyone deserves to know the truth about the past and how it informs the present. I am honored to share with you the story of the Greenwood District and the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921.

—BRANDY COLBERT



Art © 2021 by Natasha Cunningham



Jessie Weinberg

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Brandy Colbert** is the critically acclaimed author of the young adult novels *Pointe*, *The Voting Booth*, *Finding Yvonne*, *The Revolution of Birdie Randolph*, and Stonewall Award winner *Little & Lion*, as well as the middle grade novel *The Only Black Girls in Town*. A trained journalist, she also worked with boundary-breaking ballet dancer Misty Copeland to adapt her memoir into the bestselling book *Life in Motion: Young Readers Edition*, and co-adapted the young readers edition of *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*. Born and raised in Springfield, Missouri, Brandy now lives and writes in Los Angeles, and is on the faculty at Hamline University's MFA program in writing for children and young adults. You can find her online at [www.brandycolbert.com](http://www.brandycolbert.com).

## ABOUT THE BOOK

On June 1, 1921, the vibrant and affluent Black community in segregated Tulsa, Oklahoma, was devastated by a targeted, racist terror attack. But the tragedy did not occur in a vacuum. One hundred years later, this nonfiction text draws from oral histories and archival sources to provide an undaunted account of the Greenwood massacre and to hold a mirror to the unjust, inequitable policies and conventions that have historically emboldened anti-Black violence and underpinned US racial dynamics to this day.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Consider our cultural narratives, especially those you've learned in classrooms. Think about Black experiences in the United States—particularly once slavery ended. What counter-narratives—or narratives from the perspective of those who've been historically marginalized—did you find in this text that tell a different story than the ones we get from many history books? Think about erased events and experiences being brought to light, as well as how marginalized perspectives also reframe events and figures we know well.
2. Discuss the historical significance of all-Black towns to the Black community. What spaces do you have where you are safe to be yourself? Why are such spaces important to the distinction that Colbert makes between surviving and thriving (p. 41)?
3. Describe the ripple effect of disenfranchisement. How do policies like discriminatory voting regulations (literacy tests, residency requirements, etc.) or laws like the Black codes and Jim Crow remove power from communities? Use examples from the text to discuss what resistance to disenfranchisement looked like in the decades after slavery ended. What does resistance look like today?
4. When discussing the origins of the Ku Klux Klan and its role in further entrenching systemic racism, Colbert names the Klan as terrorists and their racial violence as terrorism. Why is this important? What are some consequences of reframing the Klan's anti-Black violence as anything less than domestic terrorism?
5. Discuss the role of media in the Greenwood massacre and the racial tensions surrounding it. You can talk about white-run newspapers underreporting racist violence like lynchings, and their false reports about allegations that fueled white mobs (p. 74). Consider also how media like the film *Birth of a Nation* emboldened a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and racial violence. What role do news media, films, and books play in the racial injustices happening today?
6. Relatedly, describe the significance of Black communities publishing their own newspapers. What role did the Black press play in the decades of segregation? In the Greenwood massacre specifically? What connections can you draw between these historical newspapers and present-day Black news sites (look up examples if you're unfamiliar)?
7. Colbert introduces several influential Black historical figures in this text. Had you heard of any of them or learned about them in school before? If not, why do you think that is? Discuss how you see these Black leaders' legacies having an impact today. What are some of the consequences of erasing them and their contributions?
8. Describe what "entitlement" means in your own words; then, discuss its role in the racial tensions outlined in the text. Find some of the passages where the author describes white people as resentful or angry or afraid. How do these feelings and the racist discrimination and violence they fuel relate to the idea or the belief of entitlement?
9. How does power over systems like government, law enforcement, etc. allow prejudice to thrive and normalize oppression? Think about how Black people's human and civil rights have been infringed upon as well as how crimes against the Black community go unpunished. Use examples from the text and consider the ways systemic racism against the Black community and other communities of color still operates today.
10. What do you make of the fact that white mobs and rioters so routinely targeted wealthy and otherwise successful Black citizens and businesses? Or that white vigilantes and lynch mobs attacked whole communities, not just an individual, for alleged and often fabricated crimes? How does striking at Black Americans' livelihoods relate back to entitlement? What connection can you draw with acts of racial injustice today?
11. What is "resilience"? Describe what it means to be resilient in your own words. Is resilience always positive? Find examples in the text of Black individuals' or communities' resiliency. How have you needed to be resilient in your own life?
12. Define "justice" in your own words. What would justice look like for the Greenwood residents and their descendants? How does your vision for justice relate to present-day calls for racial justice (such as M4BL's "Vision for Black Lives")?
13. In her afterword, Colbert hopes that if readers take only one thing from the book that it be that "history matters. Stories matter, and it also matters who is telling these stories" (p. 202). What does she mean by this? How do stories and who tells them matter to our collective understanding of the Tulsa Race Massacre? What are the consequences of some stories being erased and only certain voices and perspectives being heard? How can we ensure that the histories, experiences, and perspectives of marginalized people are honored and valued?

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

**Ask More Questions.** Have students research their home state's racial history. What laws or policies disproportionately affect(ed) the Black community? Who are some of the historical Black leaders and what were some of their contributions? What are some landmark racial justice events or accomplishments? Students can write up their findings or draw and annotate a timeline.

**Reflect and Act Up.** Ask students to keep a reading journal to write or draw their thoughts and questions about the information in the text. These responses don't need to be shared. Individually or in small feedback groups, have students create a racial justice action plan with concrete steps they can take to contribute to racial justice initiatives of their choice. Keep in mind that Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, and other students of color can contribute to racial justice with actions related to self- and community care.

**Extra, Extra!** Have students work in pairs, small groups, or individually to research one of the Greenwood Black entrepreneurs or other Black historical figures from the text and write up a newspaper profile for the person, complete with pictures. The profiles can be compiled into a "Greenwood Who's Who" special issue.

**The "Other" Nonfiction.** Have students research early twentieth-century Black poets and read some of their poems written around 1921 (Langston Hughes is a great example). After reading the ways Black poets captured the Black experience, students can try writing their own poems to reflect on their learning and relationship to racial justice. Encourage experimentation such as a "blackout" poem using (photocopied) pages from Colbert's text or other sources.

**History's Audience.** As a class, listen to the survivors' accounts of the Tulsa Race Massacre (some of the same accounts Colbert uses in the text).

Tulsa Historical Society: [www.tulsaahistory.org/exhibit/1921-tulsa-race-massacre/audio](http://www.tulsaahistory.org/exhibit/1921-tulsa-race-massacre/audio)

Voices of Oklahoma: [voicesofoklahoma.com](http://voicesofoklahoma.com)

Create a table to compare and contrast the details provided by survivors, then discuss as a class how to engage with and use different, even conflicting perspectives to give an authentic account of the event. Ask students to use journals or share aloud in pairs to reflect on their own feelings and reactions to the survivors' stories.



## TIPS FOR EDUCATORS

**Black Birds in the Sky as a complement to a racial justice history lesson or a unit on early twentieth-century Black artists/artistry.** Studies show our brains receive information more effectively in the form of narrative. Narratives can also trigger empathy and connection—powerful learning tools, especially for higher stakes lessons about racial injustice. Synthesize reading material by assigning activities like blog posts, TikToks, or creative writing that provide space for students to make connections between different sources and their own comments or questions.

**Black Birds in the Sky as a tool to explore nonfiction itself.** Encourage students to consider the various ways text can be structured—features like fact boxes, footnotes, nonlinear or nonsequential narrative, etc.—and how each of these elements functions to highlight primary source information. How do these elements enhance the author’s own voice and purpose? Activities like annotating a chapter allow students to identify different structural elements, as well as what they’re communicating and how they reveal the author’s informational goals.

**Nonfiction as an inquiry-based learning tool.** Nonfiction reading strategies help students engage with and take the lead in their own learning. This empowerment is also strengthened when students choose a topic and text that interests them. They can start by considering what they already know about a subject and any other sources they’ve encountered. Next, ask them to think about what it is they expect to learn. Why do they think the author used certain text structures and features; what information is communicated via images, figures, or maps? Finally, they can reflect on what they’ve actually learned, both in terms of new knowledge about the subject and about the nonfiction book itself. Consider allowing the students to peer review each other’s answers to these questions to strengthen their final write-ups.

**Nonfiction as a primer on facts vs. opinions.** Not only can students learn to break down where and how a text uses factual evidence to support opinions or to draw reasonable conclusions, they can also try their hand at fact-checking by looking at some of the cited primary sources themselves. This skill set is increasingly vital in a world of misinformation, and provides a great foundation should students choose to transition to college or another setting where they’ll build research skills. This works well as a small group activity, where each group will produce a brief report to sum up their findings. Groups can collaborate on a written report, multimedia display, or video.

**Nonfiction for self-reflection.** Nonfiction texts, especially those dealing with complicated and painful topics, can make space for students to locate themselves in historical contexts, current events, social systems, and global movements when students make connections between the information and their own lives and experiences. Pair the nonfiction text with poetry or fiction, a relevant documentary, or speaker, and have students write or record reflections over the course of a unit or semester. The reflections themselves don’t need to be evaluated, rather for a final activity, ask students to review their reflections and write about how their knowledge, understanding, or perspective changed from the first entry to the last.

