

Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues

Recommended for Grades 4-8

Book Summary: Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues

Alfa and his family are struggling. It is 1956 in Montgomery, Alabama, and they have trouble paying their rent. It is just 12 year-old Alfa, his 16 year-old sister, and their great grandmother. They all work to pay the rent, but that money keeps disappearing during the night. Someone is stealing from them. One day while they are cleaning a white lady's house, they are accused of stealing \$2000. They protest their innocence, but the fact that they are black seems to be enough to make them guilty.

Alfa and his sister are determined to figure out both who is stealing from them and who took the money. Throughout their investigation, Alfa tries to use the nonviolent methods preached by Dr. King. He faces abuse and slurs but perseveres.

[SPOILER]

It turns out that Alfa's great grandmother has been taking their rent money to keep dishonest social workers from taking them. Alfa solves the problem by proclaiming his love for her for all the world to hear. They flee, not wanting anyone to know who they are and get them into trouble. Alfa also figures out who took the money and everything ends up working out. They still have a fight ahead for civil rights, but things are more positive for him than they have been for a long time.

Author Biography: Harriette Gillem Robinet

Harriette Gillem Robinet was born in Washington D.C. on July 14, 1931. Growing up, she would spend her summers in Arlington, Virginia, where her ancestors had been slaves under Robert E. Lee. She graduated from the College of Rochelle in New York and finished her graduate studies in microbiology at Catholic University, Washington, D.C.

In 1960, she and her husband moved to the Chicago suburbs where she began her writing career. The birth of a child with cerebral palsy greatly influenced many of her books. She had a total of six children and now has four grandchildren. She and her husband currently reside in Oak Park, Illinois.



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Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think African Americans stayed in Alabama when they were treated so poorly? Do you think the bus boycott was a good way to make their point and demand their rights? Why or why not?
2. Alfa is beaten by white boys and the police do nothing (p. 7) and then people say it was his own fault. Do you think things like this really happened? Does this book do a good job of depicting Montgomery, Alabama in 1956? Why or why not?
3. We see Alfa struggling with wanting to use Martin Luther King, Jr.'s message of non-violence and with wanting to fight the white boys (p. 17). Do you think using nonviolence is more effective than using violence would have been? Why or why not? Have you ever tried to apply something like that to your own life?
4. Alfa refers to 'The System' several times throughout this book (p. 5, 14,16, 21). Alfa seems to feel that some white people are just as trapped by the system as black people are. What do you think 'The System' is? What kept people trapped by it? Does a form of 'The System' still exist today? Why do you think so?
5. Mama Merryfield says she is walking for her dignity (p. 29). Why do you think it is so important for her to participate even though she knows that she is getting confused and lost? What about when she takes off all her clothes after being accused of stealing (p. 48)? Should she be embarrassed or should the people accusing her be embarrassed for driving her to do that?
6. Several times Alfa thinks about Emmett Till, the boy who was murdered for talking to a white woman. Clearly Alfa thinks it is possible that something like that could happen to him since he writes the letter to his family (p. 103). Do you think he is being paranoid or is it possibility? Why?
7. Alfa and his sister are crushed when they find the letter from their mother (p. 104) saying to send them to the county and that she doesn't want them. What does being a mother mean? Does it have anything to do with the person who raised you?
8. Why do the social worker and the other man threaten Mama Merryfield when she is obviously very poor? Why wouldn't they go after someone richer to blackmail? What does the fact that Mama Merryfield pays them off say about her?
9. Should Alfa forgive Mr. Greendale for firing him? Why or why not? Do you think Mr. Greendale is a racist? Why or why not?
10. What role does greed play in the story? Is Mrs. Williams the greediest person in the story or are the two drug users blackmailing Mama Merryfield the worst? Why do you think so?



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