



**Classroom Guide for**  
**PAUL ROBESON**  
Written by **Eloise Greenfield**  
Illustrated by **George Ford**

**Reading Level**

\*Reading Level: Grade 4

Interest Level: Grades 3–6

Guided Reading Level: Q

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 5.1/1.0

Lexile™ Measure: 810L

\*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

**Themes**

African American History, Performing Arts, Theater, Perseverance/Overcoming Obstacles, Dreams and Aspirations, Discrimination, Biography, Nonfiction, United States History, African American Interest, Activism

**Synopsis**

Winner of the 1976 Coretta Scott King Author Award Honor and Jane Addams Children's Book Award, this biography tells the story of Paul Robeson, who overcame racial discrimination to become an international entertainer and civil rights activist.

Paul Robeson was born on April 9, 1898. The son of a pastor, Paul learned from his father to love written and spoken words, to be proud of being black, and to stand up for what he believed was right. These were the things that guided Paul throughout his life.

After achieving academic and athletic success in both high school and college, Paul gained fame as a singer and actor. His talent and his deep, rich voice won him admirers and fans worldwide. But as he traveled the globe for performances, Paul became disturbed by the poverty and injustices that he saw. In the 1940s and 1950s he began speaking out. He fought for freedom. At that time, such activism was not tolerated. Paul Robeson came to be considered an enemy of the United States government.

With dignity and a dynamic spirit, Paul Robeson—athlete, actor, singer, and civil rights activist—stayed true to himself and took a stand for his beliefs. In a beautifully updated edition of this award-winning biography, a new generation of readers will be introduced to this courageous man. The introduction and afterword by author focuses on Robeson's legacy.

### **BACKGROUND**

*From the author:* The name Paul Robeson brings back wonderful memories from my childhood in the 1930s and 1940s. I remember hearing him sing. I heard him on the radio, not on television, because there was no television then. I loved his voice. It was low, very low, and had just the right amount of trembling, not too much and not too little. He sang as if he really meant the words of the songs. Paul Robeson was very famous, and many people loved him. They loved his singing and acting, and they admired him for the things he said in speeches. His admirers were not happy when, in the late 1940s, some people made trouble for him and kept him from performing. That trouble is a part of the story this book will tell. It will also tell of Paul Robeson's courage and his desire to help people all over the world. A large part of this story is about the boy, Paul, and his growing-up years. Family was important to him and helped him to develop his talents. Family, friends, and neighbors also helped him to recover from a great loss he suffered when he was very young. Paul Robeson grew up to be a man the world will never forget. I hope you enjoy meeting him. —Eloise Greenfield, author of *Paul Robeson*

*From the Afterword:* In April 1973, almost three years before the death of Paul Robeson, a seventy-fifth birthday celebration was held for him at Carnegie Hall in New York City. Twenty famous stars performed in front of a large audience. Paul was too sick to attend. His son went in his place. Paul, Jr., was as close to his father as Paul Robeson had been to his. Since Paul Robeson's death, much has been written about him—plays and films that dramatize his life, newspaper and magazine articles, and books. Countless honors have been given in memory of his contributions. In 1995, more than seventy-five years after Paul was the Rutgers football hero, he was made a member of the College Football Hall of Fame. In February 1998, he was named the winner of a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award for his music. And throughout that year, people across the United States and the world celebrated Paul Robeson's one-hundredth birthday. In 2004, the United States Postal Service issued, as part of its Black Heritage series, a first-class Paul Robeson postage stamp. Paul Robeson lived and sang a purposeful life. The people of the world are fortunate that, because of recordings, we can still hear the power, the richness, and the beauty of his voice. —Eloise Greenfield, author of *Paul Robeson*

### **Prereading Focus Questions**

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5 and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

Before introducing the book to students, you may wish to develop background knowledge and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

1. Take a look at the front and back covers. Take a picture walk. Ask students to make a prediction. Do you think this book will be fiction or nonfiction? What makes you think so?
2. What does a performer do? What are some types of performances with which you are familiar (movies, plays, musicals, concerts)? Have you ever seen or been in a performance? Share a memory you have of going to a play or movie.

3. What is *persistence*? Share a time you demonstrated persistence. What was your goal? What challenges did you face? Who helped you along the way in achieving your goal? How did you stay motivated?
4. What are human rights? What human rights issues do you think are important today?
5. What is an activist? What characteristics does an activist need to be successful? Who are some current and historical activists?
6. What is your definition of courage? How do you think people can make a difference? How would you go about addressing a wrong?
7. What do you know about the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s? What were the social, political, or economic conditions of African Americans during each of these times?
8. Why do you think I chose this book for us to read today?

### Exploring the Book

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 1, Craft & Structure, Strand 5, and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

Read and talk about the title of the book. Ask students what they think this book will most likely be about and who the book might be about. What situations and places might be talked about in the text? What do you think might happen? What information do you think you might learn? What makes you think that?

Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: front and back covers, title page, note from the author at the beginning, afterword, and author's sources.

### Setting a Purpose for Reading

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

Have students read to find out who Paul Robeson is, what and who inspires Paul Robeson to pursue human rights activism, about the obstacles he faces, and how he overcomes these obstacles.

Encourage students to consider why the author, Eloise Greenfield, would want to share this story with young people. Have students also read to determine why the illustrator, George Ford, would create the image on the book's cover with all the children's faces.

### VOCABULARY

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

The story contains several content-specific and academic words that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary below. Encourage a variety of strategies to support students' vocabulary acquisition: look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, create a specific action for each word, list synonyms and antonyms, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

#### CONTENT SPECIFIC

plantation	North Carolina	Princeton	parsonage	coal furnace
carriage	checkers	pastor	reverend	glee club
<i>Othello</i>	Rutgers University	with honors	scholarship	cleats
touchdown	New York City	minister	Harlem	spirituals
England	black freedom	communist	Congress	

## ACADEMIC

enslaved	hard blow	admired	tragic	sprained
disappointed	throbbing	concerts	citizens	fairly
government	protest	heritage		

**AFTER READING****Discussion Questions**

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and illustrations in the book to support their responses. **To build skills in close reading of a text, students should cite evidence with their answers.**

**Literal Comprehension**

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1 and 3)

1. What challenges (large and small) does Paul tackle on his way to becoming a professional performer and public activist?
2. What does Paul's father think of Paul's plans to become a lawyer, instead of a minister? Why does he think this? Why might Paul's father think preaching is a better goal for Paul than his dream to be a lawyer?
3. How does Paul's father influence his beliefs and the person he becomes?
4. How does Paul Robeson like to spend his time as a child? In a Venn diagram, compare Paul's activities with the pastime activities of children today.
5. What aspects of performing are interesting and exciting to Paul? What characteristics of acting, singing, theater, and the stage are appealing to him? Compare the influence of the stage to the pulpit.
6. What does Paul do to get his opinions and voice heard despite the tactics of theater owners, government officials, politicians, and other critics?
7. How is he able to continue sharing his voice and ideas to people even though he cannot travel outside the United States?
8. Why does Paul decide to become a performer and not just stay in New York City as a lawyer? What limitations does he face in the law profession? How do the performing arts change Paul's life? How does Paul change after professionally singing and acting?

**Extension/Higher Level Thinking**

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 2 and 3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4–6)

1. How do you think Paul Robeson's father feels when Paul is accepted into college?
2. What words would you use to describe Paul Robeson?
3. Why is Paul's first trip to England (in 1922) significant? How does the experience change his life and perspective? Who is Lawrence Brown?
4. How does performing change Paul's life? How does Paul change after professionally singing and acting?
5. Do you think Paul disappointed his father overall? Why or why not? Although Paul's father never gets to see Paul perform professionally or fight for justice, do you think he would have been proud of his adult son? Why or why not?
6. What words would you use to describe Paul Robeson? Describe how Paul Robeson demonstrates persistence, optimism, ambition, and/or enthusiasm.
7. Paul faces quite a few detractors in his pursuit of justice for African Americans and others, but he has many supporters too. Who would likely have been helpers, fans, or advocates of Paul? Why might so many people have been drawn to Paul Robeson's work and beliefs?

8. Explain how geography affects Paul Robeson's life and opportunities. Think about what is happening during Paul's lifetime in New York/New Jersey versus the South in the United States versus England and the rest of Europe. If Paul had been born and stayed in North Carolina (like his father), would he have been able to pursue acting? Why or why not? Would Paul have achieved success if he stayed in New York City instead of travelling to England and beyond? Why or why not?
9. How was the label of "communist" used to damage and suppress Paul Robeson?

### **Reader's Response**

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1 and 2 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4)

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader's response journals, essays, or oral discussion. You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work.

1. If Paul Robeson were alive today, which people or issues in the world you think he would want to help? In a letter to Paul Robeson, argue which issue or group of people he should advocate for. Alternatively, students can write a letter to Paul describing an issue they are passionate about and how they want to solve it.
2. If Paul Robeson were alive today, what do you suppose he would think about equality now and the Black Lives Matter movement? In a letter to Paul Robeson, explain to him about Black Lives Matter and the role students are taking in civil rights issues today. Alternatively, imagine you are Paul Robeson and write a letter to students with advice on standing up for what you believe is right.
3. Paul's father was disappointed in Paul choosing to be a lawyer and not becoming a minister. Write about a time you have tried to change an adult's mind about something. Were you successful? What advice do you have for Paul to help his father understand why pursuing law is so important to him?
4. Paul Robeson is punished for having communist friends. Do you think it is ever fair or appropriate to punish or treat people differently for the friends and associations they have? Why or why not? Has there ever been a time when an adult made a judgment about or gave punishment to you because of the friends you have?

### **ELL Teaching Activities**

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English Language Learners.

1. Assign ELL students to partner-read the story with strong English readers/speakers. Students can alternate reading between pages, repeat passages after one another, or listen to the more fluent reader. Students who speak Spanish can help with the pronunciations of the Spanish words in the book.
2. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. Depending on students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading:
  - Review the illustrations in order and have students summarize what is happening on each page, first orally, then in writing.
  - Have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the story or key details. Then ask students to write a short summary, synopsis, or opinion about what they have read.
4. Have students give a short talk about how what they admire about Paul Robeson or a moment in the book they connect to the most and why.



5. The book contains some content-specific and academic words that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary. Expose English Language Learners to multiple vocabulary strategies. Have students make predictions about word meanings, look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, list synonyms and antonyms, create an action for each word, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

### INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

(Introduction to the Standards, page 7: Students who are college and career ready must be able to build strong content knowledge, value evidence, and use technology and digital media strategically and capably)

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas. These can also be used for extension activities, for advanced readers, and for building a home-school connection.

#### Social Studies

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7 and 9)

(Writings Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strand 2 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

1. Have students create a timeline of important events in Paul Robeson's life using the book and other sources for information.
2. Provide students with a world map. (An outline of a Robinson projection world map can be downloaded [here](#) for reproduction).<sup>1</sup> Help students identify and label the places featured in the book: New York City, North Carolina, Princeton (New Jersey), England, France, Africa, Canada, France, Russia, and the West Indies. Students should label the ocean separating Europe from the United States. Encourage students to mark their location on the map. Discuss what a compass rose is and the purpose it serves on a map. Students may also build their own maps at [National Geographic Education's MapMaker 1-Page Maps](#).<sup>2</sup>
3. Have students compare the life and legacy of another significant *Othello* actor, [Ira Aldridge](#),<sup>3</sup> to [Paul Robeson](#).<sup>4</sup> How are these performers' experiences similar despite different time periods? What challenges did they face due to being African American? How does racism affect their lives and beliefs? What character traits do they share that allow them to overcome obstacles? How did the performing arts open opportunities for them? What legacies have they left behind? Have students first compare the similarities and differences of each book in a Venn diagram and then formalize in an essay presenting the similarities and differences. Alternatively, students can investigate other Civil Rights activists, such as [Langston Hughes](#),<sup>5</sup> [Arthur Ashe](#),<sup>6</sup> and [Rosa Parks](#).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.worksheetworks.com/geography/world/robinson.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/mapping/outline-map/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2885>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/tri203.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2423>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2721>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2382>

**Writing**

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–2 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6)  
(Language Standards, Conventions of Standard English, Strand 1)  
(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strands 4 and 5)

1. Have students write a blog post or a letter to the editor exploring how today's world is different from and/or similar to Paul's. Students should take a position whether people of different races treat one another better today and why they think so. Are people treated equally nowadays, or do you see evidence of unfair treatment around you? If people are being treated unfairly, what part could you play in changing things?
2. Ask students to imagine they have seen one of Paul's performances. Have them write a review of his performance. Students may wish to study examples of theater and movie reviews in newspapers or online for inspiration.
3. Encourage students in an essay to describe Paul Robeson's impact on the image of African American men and women. How did he and his achievements challenge racist stereotypes of the day?

**Arts/Performing Arts**

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 6)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 2 and 3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strand 8)

1. Turn *Paul Robeson* into a [reader's theater script](#) for students to perform.<sup>8</sup> Characters include: Paul Robeson as a child, college student, and adult; his father, brothers; his mother; his wife; theater owners; and government officials. Encourage broad student participation by creating multiple narrators, having the whole class speak Paul Robeson's lines together, and preparing short lines for the fans and critics reactions.
2. Encourage students to design and create a poster advertising one of Paul Robeson's performances. Imagine Paul was making his final tour as an actor or singer in the United States. Persuade American audiences to attend his shows based on facts found in the book and other sources.
3. Have students listen to a few [recordings](#) of Paul Robeson singing.<sup>9</sup> Ask them to describe his voice and compare his songs and type of music to what students like and listen to on their own.
4. Invite an actor or a director from a high school, local college, or community theater program to your classroom. Before the visit, encourage students to brainstorm questions to ask this person about theater and acting. How can someone become an actor? What kind of training do actors need? What are some responsibilities actors have? What challenges has this person faced (discrimination, lack of encouragement, low self-esteem, lack of resources, etc.) in the pursuit of her or his goal? How has this person persisted? What are the differences among acting in theater, film, and television? Following the visit, have students write thank you letters with additional any additional questions to the guest speaker.
5. Paul was the [first black actor](#) since 1860 to perform the role of Othello in a major production.<sup>10</sup> Have students memorize and present a passage from the play, *Othello*, to the class. Students can explore the larger work, [Othello](#).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/readers-theater-giving-students-reason-read-aloud>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.folkways.si.edu/paul-roberson/on-my-journey-independent-recordings/african-american-music-folk-struggle-protest/album/smithsonian>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item126876.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.folgerdigitaltexts.org/?chapter=5&play=Oth&loc=p7>

**Home-School Connection**

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strand 2, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strand 7)

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 9)

1. Encourage students to interview their parents, grandparents, or guardians. Have students write down their interviewee's answers to bring to class. Ask students to reflect on these answers and write what they learned from this interview:
  - Ask them to describe a time when they performed in front of a large crowd. What activity were they doing (sports, art, music, theater, comedy, debate, dance, etc.)? How did they prepare? Who helped them practice? How did their families feel when they performed? How did they themselves feel about the whole experience?
  - When was there a time they experienced prejudice or witnessed prejudice toward someone else? How did it make them feel? How did they overcome or manage that obstacle? What changes have they seen since they were younger or hope to see in the future to make the world a fairer, more just place?
2. Invite students to research a theater actor or singer (past or present) from their community, city, or state. In which productions has this actor or singer performed? What challenges has this person faced? Create a timeline of major events in the performer's life and career. Using a Venn diagram, compare and contrast the performer's life and career with Paul Robeson's.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Eloise Greenfield** is a celebrated poet and the author of more than forty children's books. Among her recent titles is Lee & Low Books' *When the Horses Ride By*, a Notable Books for a Global Society selection. Greenfield has won many awards and honors for her work, including the Coretta Scott King Author Award and the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children. Greenfield has also been inducted into the International Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent. She lives in Washington, D.C.

**ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR**

**George Ford** has illustrated numerous books for children, including several for noted authors such as Nikki Grimes and Nikki Giovanni. In 1974 he was the recipient of the first Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award for *Ray Charles*, now published by Lee & Low Books. His other award-winning books include *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Robert Coles. A lifelong jazz enthusiast, Ford and his wife live in Brooklyn, New York.

**Book Information**

\$10.95, PAPERBACK

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Themes: African American History, Performing Arts, Theater, Perseverance/Overcoming Obstacles, Dreams and Aspirations, Discrimination, Biography, Nonfiction, United States History, African American Interest, Activism



**RESOURCES ON THE WEB:**

Learn more about *Paul Robeson* at: <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2703>

**ORDER INFORMATION**

**On the Web:**

<https://www.leeandlow.com/contact/ordering> (general order information)

<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/2703> (secure online ordering)

**By Phone:** 212-779-4400 ext. 25

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