

Two Books. Two Authors.

An Inside Look at a Unique School Visit Partnership on the Civil Rights Movement

Bethany Hegedus and Kekla Magoon

Standing side by side, on the spot-lit auditorium stage, we glanced at each other nervously. It was our first presentation, to a crowd of 350 middle school students. The students, initially squirmy, had fallen silent. But were they really that deeply engaged ... or had they fallen comatose with boredom? Bethany stepped forward. "We need six volunteers," she called. We held our breaths for barely a beat, before hundreds of hands shot up.

We looked at each other and smiled. It was working.

Race and class—few subjects are as highly debated in our country, and few subjects are more likely to divide rather than to unite. While this may be true, it is their differences that bind us—authors Kekla Magoon and Bethany Hegedus—in a multifaceted creative partnership. We are co-editors of the literary journal *Hunger Mountain*, friends who often critique each other's work, and most importantly, co-creators of "The Movement: A Decade of Change in America, 1959-1968." In this joint endeavor, we present a series of talks on the civil rights movement touching on two controversial aspects of the era: the formation of citizens' councils in response to the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, and the social and community contributions of the Black Panther party. In this article, we discuss how our partnership came to be, and the impact our work is having on young readers.

Creating "The Movement"

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Our friendship struck up in the fall of 2004, when we ran into one another in the crowded teen section of a Barnes & Noble bookstore on Manhattan's Upper East Side. At the time, we were both enrolled in the Master of Fine Arts in Writing for Children and Young Adults Program at the Vermont College of Fine Arts. So, we had seen each other before, but in Vermont, not in New York City. Our faces were familiar to one another, and we exchanged occasional glances as we independently browsed the teen new releases, each thinking, How do I know this woman? Ah, we both finally realized. From school. And we started a conversation.

That day, the threads of our friendship began. Not only were we both pursuing the MFA degree, we both were writing civil rights era novels, and ones that were different from any already on the shelves. Kekla's brave book, *The Rock and the River*, is the first children's book to tackle the multi-faceted and often misunderstood Black Panther Party. Bethany's *Between Us Baxters* is a warm, compelling novel

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with strong, rich characters, that makes the impact of the Citizens Councils' racist actions feel immediate and personal.

We each bring our unique, individual perspectives and experiences to our work, and to our partnership. Bethany is a White woman, who spent time in both the North and the South growing up. Her novel, *Between Us Baxters*, set in Holcomb County, Georgia, in 1959, tells the story of 12-year-old Polly Baxter and 14-year-old Timbre Ann

Biggs. Because Polly's mother and Timbre Ann's aunt have always been close, the two girls consider themselves almost sisters, despite their different races. But when well-to-do Black businesses are set afire, Polly and Timbre Ann's bond of friendship is tested.

Kekla is a biracial woman raised in the Midwest. Her Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award-winning novel, *The Rock and the River*, follows the story of 13-year-old Sam Childs in Chicago in 1968. Sam's father is a well-respected civil rights movement activist, so Sam is shocked when his older brother and best friend, Stick, joins the Black Panther Party in the wake of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The confusion and turmoil in Sam's community, in his family, and in his own mind leave him struggling to understand which path is right for him.

As we got to know each other, it became clear that we were dealing with similar issues through our writing, albeit from radically different perspectives. The overlapping, yet distinct, core messages of our novels intrigued us, and we quickly realized we had the components of something really dynamic at our fingertips.

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Between Us Baxters and *The Rock and the River* complement each other well. One book is set early in the movement and one set toward the end. One takes place in the South, the other the North. One features a poor White girl, the other a middle class Black boy. The two books do not just contain opposites. There are similarities as well. Both deal largely with communities in racial turmoil, communities that look and feel so different from one another, but are at the brink of change. Both books debate what constitutes justice, and both investigate personal choices and the responsibilities of one's own actions. The fact that we come at these issues from different angles makes for a dynamic discussion.

As authors and individuals, we complement each other well, too. All of the ways we are seemingly opposites—Bethany is White, Kekla is Black; Bethany is outgoing, Kekla is reserved—come together into a unique package that shows young readers that “A Writer” doesn't have to look or act one certain way.

We both knew from the beginning that we had the makings of something special here. Yet, by being welcomed into schools, what has emerged is something richer and more complex than we had initially anticipated. Students bring their own perspectives and ideas into the conversation. They constantly point out new connections between our two books and our two main characters that even we, the authors, have not seen.

Unexpected Insights

Through “The Movement” and our school presentations, we strive to bring our books to life for our teen readers. We challenge them to imagine what life was like for people who lived in the South in 1959, and in urban centers in 1968. We inspire them to stand in the shoes of our characters, just for a moment, to imagine someone else's life. In-

evitably, they connect the life of that other person to something within their own experience.

For instance, as a way of getting the audience to consider why people take rash actions, like some of the characters in our books do, we ask a series of questions. “Who here has ever felt angry?” Most hands go up. “Who has ever been really angry, but tried to hide it, to hold it in?” Some hands go up. “What happens?” All hands go down. The students sit quiet, uncertain. We wait to see if anyone comes up with anything. What we're trying to illustrate is that if you hold in your anger too long, it eventually bursts out, maybe in ways that are beyond your control. Sometimes we get an answer along these lines. And sometimes, the students surprise us.

At Franklin Middle School in New Jersey, one very tall boy stood when we asked explicitly: “What happens to us when we store our anger, rather than find constructive ways of expressing it?”

“Eventually the anger and frustration leaks out,” he replied. “And you end up bleeding words.”

Bleeding words. The poetry and conciseness of the phrase gave us chills. Haven't we all, when heated and furious, bled words we wanted to take back? Words and actions we'd later need a band-aid for ... or more?

The rest of the students got it after that. Nods all around. In that moment, everyone in the room became closer to a new understanding—of our books, of the world, of each other, of themselves. It was powerful.

Our Program

We structure our presentation around a range of visual, auditory, and interactive elements to be sure we're meeting the needs of a wide range of students and learning styles. The centerpiece of our program is a Readers' Theatre, in which students act out a scene from each book, then compare and contrast the readings as a group. Before engaging students in this way, though, we prepare them for the discussion by presenting background information on the civil rights era, and introducing each book.

It's important to us to keep students actively involved and engaged throughout our entire visit, so we begin by inviting them to tell us what they already know about the civil rights movement. They shout out words that remind them of the era, such as “segregation,” “protest,” “Dr. King,” and “I have a dream.” The number and variety of words they share with us give us an initial feel for how much the students know about the topic, and how willing to volunteer ideas they are. If the words are really specific, or they give us a lot of answers, we know that they are already well grounded in civil rights movement history. If the group is shy, or offers only a few suggestions, then we're prepared with a slide of many words that we came up with, and we can spend a few moments calling them out ourselves, and offering some additional background that will help the students understand the presentation that will follow.

A short video/photo essay set to '60s music gives the students a glimpse of some iconic images from the decade of civil rights, some which are likely familiar to them while others may be new. Some are shocking, like images of hooded Ku Klux Klan members, and fire hoses being turned on protesters, while others are uplifting, such as the crowd outside the Lincoln Memorial as Dr. King spoke at the March on Washington, and the faces of children their own age who participated in the movement. The barrage of images never fails to move the crowd, and afterward we invite students to share how the video affected them. We discuss the images that may have been new to them and those that are familiar. We ask them to share some of the emotions they felt while watching the photos go by.

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At Newton Country Day School in Massachusetts, we presented to an all-female, middle school student population, and the girls seemed especially affected by the visuals. They shared a range of emotions, from anger, sadness, and disbelief over the photos of racism in action, to hope, comfort, and happiness over the images of people uniting to demand change. The girls' responses demonstrated a deep understanding of the era's complexities; they seemed quite intrigued to see things they had only read about in history class come to life in a different way.

Our Original Content: *Between Us Baxters* and the Citizens Councils

Between Us Baxters is set in 1959 in the years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. In 1954 the Supreme Court made racial segregation in schools and other public facilities illegal.

In the fictional Holcomb County small town, a Citizens Council forms. Bethany tells students, "Citizen Councils, I wish, were something I imagined. Instead, they were very real. In towns all over the south, bankers, doctors, lawyers, legislators, preachers, teachers, and merchants came together to fight the implementation of the Brown decision. Polly, in narration thinks:

The Citizens Council was supposed to make sure school stays segregated—colored or white. The Klan, on the other hand, was all about dirty dealings. Always was. Scaring folks whatever way they knew how: lynchings, beatings, cross burnings. But if what Timbre Ann said was true, why, then both groups were cut from the same cloth, even if the Council didn't play dress up in pointy hoods." (65-66)

After sharing a bit more from the book, Bethany says to the students, "Think about your best friend for a moment. The friend you constantly text, go to the movies with, share ear buds as you listen to music." Then she asks them to imagine what it would feel like if your entire town, including the chief of police, frowned on that friendship.

"Imagine the Sheriff pulled up into your driveway," she says, "Where all your neighbors could see and had a talk with you about it, telling you 'Ain't you too old to be playing with the likes of her?' Later in the novel, the Sheriff says, 'Well, you best find a more suitable playmate.' The scene unfolds like this:

I didn't take kindly to him ordering me around. I made sure Mama wasn't around to hear me, to tell me what I knew was right was wrong.

"Seventh grade is too old for playmates, Sheriff." This time I didn't mumble or hang my head.

The Sheriff raised his brow, sure he'd been sassed." (83)

When the students reopen their eyes, we can see that for a mo-



ment they were back in 1959. That they were thinking about the boy or girl next to them—most likely their best friend—and what it would have felt like for their entire town—parents, principals, store owners, bus drivers, fellow students—working hard to break up the friendship. Occasionally some students may have encountered parental disapproval regarding a friendship choice, but when it came to Polly and Timbre Ann's friendship, the disapproval was rampant and could turn violent at any time. It often did.

Between Us Baxters is representative of its place and time, where the Whites were more organized in their protests and opposition to integration and used violence and threats to get their way. During this time Blacks were just beginning to organize, protest, and march, and their efforts would grow stronger over the next ten years.

Our Original Content: *The Rock and the River* and The Black Panther Party

Skipping ahead ten years, we touch on another rarely discussed aspect of the civil rights era: the shift toward militancy in the latter part of the movement. In *The Rock and the River*, Sam is torn between the traditional civil rights activism and joining the Black Panthers. Most of the time, a good portion of the students have never heard of The Black Panther Party, which was founded in Oakland, California, in 1966. It quickly spread to other cities around the country. The Black Panthers believed that non-violent protest wasn't working. Even after ten years of holding demonstrations, they still saw a lot of racism, injustice, and violence, like police brutality, happening in their communities. They abandoned passive resistance in favor of a self-defense platform.

Kekla introduces the Panthers and offers a little bit of background on their movement, including why we don't usually hear much about them. "For us today, talking about the BPP can be uncomfortable, because they did use violence. We know that violence is never really a good solution to problems. But people knew that in 1968, too, so why did so many people decide to join a militant group like the Black Panthers?"

For one thing, the Panthers gave people something to do besides wait and protest. They were community organizers, helping people help each other in poor neighborhoods. They offered free breakfast programs, built health clinics, set up legal aid, and provided protection from police brutality. The message was: We don't have to wait

any longer. We're going to do something about this right now. They put out a call for "land, bread, housing, clothing, justice, education, and peace," and communities responded.

Those who turned to the Black Panthers weren't all interested in violence—a common misconception. People often shy away from teaching about the Panthers because it seems like it could be advocating violence to do so. Yet we're comfortable teaching about every war that's ever been fought, and how and why it came about. To talk about the civil rights movement as though violence wasn't part of it diminishes the contribution of thousands of citizen activists who put their lives on the line for what they believed in. Even their non-violent acts took place in an atmosphere of intense racial violence and required a special kind of courage, which should not be discounted as merely "peaceful."

When we choose volunteers, or when the teachers cast the characters, we strive for gender- and race-neutral casting.

It took years to achieve even small changes. People, especially young people, grew angry and impatient. And can you blame them? "Today, we know that the civil rights movement worked," Kekla says to the students. "Changes happened. The country is a lot different today. But in 1968, they couldn't see the future. People were desperate for change, and willing to do anything to get it. When I was writing the book, I had to ask myself over and over: what would I have done? When you read *The Rock and the River*, you'll find yourself wondering the same thing: what would you do if you were in Sam's place? In his time? It's not so easy."

Bringing the Books to Life: Readers' Theatre

To showcase the novels and engage our young readers, we've pulled two scenes from each book and created Readers' Theatre scripts. These scripts can be provided to teachers in advance or on the day of the presentation. Adding a performance aspect gets students up and out of their seats and gives them the opportunity to walk for a while in Sam's and Polly's shoes.

Our Readers' Theatre scenes are carefully selected to complement each other and promote discussion. They are also scenes that do not require students to have read the books in advance to understand what is happening. In the scene from *Between Us Baxters*, Polly witnesses a Black mother getting thrown off a city bus because her baby is crying. Will Polly intervene? Should she try? And in the scene from *The Rock and the River*, Sam is accused of shoplifting, when he hasn't done anything but reach into his pocket for his money. Should he leave the store, indignant, or go ahead with his intended purchase? Students never fail to express a variety of opinions about the characters' actions, making for a lively debate after each performance.

When we choose volunteers, or when the teachers cast the characters, we strive for gender- and race-neutral casting. It doesn't matter if the person reading "Polly" is White and a girl or if the one reading "Sam" is an African-American boy. It doesn't matter if the prejudiced bus driver and the racist store owner are played by someone White. What matters is that during the scene performance each student—those reading on stage or at the front of the room and those

listening in their seats—thinks about the choices and consequences each character makes.

"I liked acting out the scenes," said twelve-year-old Neha Hinduja. Another student agreed with her. "I can't wait to read the rest of the book now," he said.

Relating It All to Real Life

During the Readers' Theatre discussion at Franklin Middle School in New Jersey, an African-American student commented that Sam was "smarter" (less naïve) than Polly, because his actions protected him instead of putting him in danger, as Polly's could have. Hmm. Interesting point. As the authors, we both raised our eyebrows. We hadn't heard that one before. Was it true?

A dialogue emerged over whether Sam's actions were truly "smarter" or whether his experiences gave him a different perspective on the situation. In helping to shape the discussion, Bethany commented on the time period difference—how much had changed between 1959 and 1968—and Kekla questioned whether the characters' races might have had an impact on their behavior. Shyly bouncing in her seat, the girl who made the original comment grinned. "Yeah. I know what you mean. I didn't think of it like that. Sam would've dealt with stuff like that before."

We then went on to discuss instances where the students attending the presentation may have encountered racism or discrimination, either firsthand or as bystanders. While they were reluctant to share actual stories, heads nodded around the room. "Could something like this happen today?" we asked. "Yes," the group readily agreed.

"The Movement" on the Move

We have had the unique opportunity to present to a wide range of student groups in locations across the Northeast, and we look forward to visiting schools across the country. We've presented for racially mixed groups and predominantly White groups, wealthy to working class, private school and public school, single-gender and co-ed, and we offer the same presentation to any demographic. The presentation works equally well in a small group of 15, a library packed with 80, and an auditorium with over 300.

An advantage to our partnership is the ability to connect with and inspire more young people in one visit. Not every student will feel a bond with Bethany, and not every student will feel a bond with Kekla. Yet, between the two of us, there are plenty of opportunities for the students to find points of connection. This is one reason our joint program appeals to educators. "There's something there for everyone," said Margaret Auguste, librarian of Franklin Township Middle School. "There's a 'boy book' and a 'girl book.' One of the reasons I was excited about your presentation was that I knew it would appeal to all my students."

Our Rock Star Moment: All-Girls Private School

Our first presentation was to the middle school girls of Newton Country Day School in Newton, Massachusetts. The girls proved incredibly attentive, and quite a few raised their hands when we wanted to know who among them liked to write. They asked a long series of thoughtful questions about what it means to be an author and writer in the world today. Having two authors presenting was a strong benefit that day, as we were able to discuss our different processes and work styles. There's no right formula for how to be a successful writer, and our sharing of the ways we are alike and the



Kekla Magoon, Margaret Auguste and Bethany Hegedus

ways we differ added depth to our presentation.

When the formal presentation finished, we held a book sale and signing. Many of the girls did not have money to buy the books, but all were eager to get our autographs on postcards and notebooks. After the fact, we joked that we felt like rock stars, the way the young ladies clamored for a chance to talk to us and get our autographs. In addition to it simply being fun to witness their energy and enthusiasm, it was also a truly empowering experience. It often seems that film and television are edging literature out of the way as a preferred pastime for young people today. It was exciting to be in an environment where books and authors could be celebrated in a similar way.

Our Keynote Presentation: Special Event for Minority Students

Later, we spoke at a Middle School Students of Color Conference, sponsored by the Associated Independent Schools of New England. The day, jam-packed with activities, gave minority students a chance to be the majority, plus the opportunity to meet with affinity groups of their own ethnicity. During small group breakout sessions, we each led writing workshops for the kids. Our keynote presentation, centered around our Readers' Theatre pieces, brought all students together for reflective discussion.

We were nervous about presenting to a huge auditorium of 350 students. The Readers' Theatre requires 12 student readers. Our big fear: what if no one volunteers to come forward and participate? We needn't have worried. Nearly every hand in the room went up, much to our pleasure. As the students came down to read, we projected the text of the scene on the overhead screen so the audience could follow along. Amazingly, the whole room paid full attention through the readings. The discussion that followed was rich. That day, we became truly convinced that diving right into the pages is the best way to get teens engaged in these stories. It was wonderful to recognize how easily they were able to become excited about reading the rest of the books after just that tiny nudge.

Our School Visit: Suburban Public School

Six months later, we visited a school and library in suburban New Jersey, Franklin Township Middle School. We had a unique reception there, as the students had taken it upon themselves to prepare in advance for the Readers' Theatre portion of our talk. They pre-cast the roles—without regard to race, interestingly enough—and rehearsed stage blocking and movements. They even created and collected fun props. We were thrilled to see these classes taking the initiative to expand the impact of our presentation beyond the hour and a half we were with them in person. It proved a great opportunity to practice teamwork and exercise some creativity.

After the formal presentation, we had the opportunity to sit down with a small group of students who had read at least one of the books in advance of our visit. "I like to read," said twelve-year-old Jason Wang. When we asked how he liked our books, he said he finished one of them in a single day. "I couldn't stop reading it so I put it up on the mirror, and read it while I brushed my teeth."

"I was excited," said twelve-year-old Jay Parekh when asked what he thought about our visit. "I read so many books and now I could connect to real authors and find out what they were thinking when they wrote the story and why they wrote it."

At the End of the Day

Through diverse experiences like these, we've interacted with youth from a range of backgrounds. Wealthy, middle class, and working class. All imaginable races and ethnicities. Eager readers and reluctant readers. We've run the gamut, and we found that these young people share a great deal of common ground. They love stories and can empathize with characters far removed from their own experiences. They can think, analyze, share, listen, and play in ways that delight and amaze us.

"I am really glad you both came to the school," Ms. Auguste wrote to us about a week after our visit. She reported that, "The kids are still talking about it and reading the books."

No matter where we've been, we always leave our school visits feeling a wonderful combination of drained and re-energized. It's a tough day's work, engaging with and responding to students on these compelling topics, but it invariably also reminds us why we do what we do. It moves us, hearing their laughter when our characters say something silly, and watching them cringe moments later when the characters are experiencing pain. Getting up close and personal with our readers is how we can see our writing at work in the world. The students' questions inspire us to think more deeply; their insights start our imaginations rolling in new directions. We never cease to be amazed by their creativity, understanding, and boundless energy. We can't wait to head off to our next visit!

Bethany Hegedus and **Kekla Magoon** are the co-creators of "The Movement: A Decade of Change in America, 1959-1968," and co-editors of YA and Children's Literature for *Hunger Mountain*, the arts journal of Vermont College of Fine Arts. Visit us online at bethanyhegedus.com and kekلامagoon.com. Want to book us? Email: TwoBooksTwoAuthors@gmail.com. ☺

Why I Write About Race and Class
Bethany Hegedus, author of *Between Us Baxters*:

For much of my life, I've straddled the racial and class divisions between the North and the South. I was born outside Chicago, Illinois, and as I moved through elementary and middle school, I developed friends of all races. At 13, when I moved to Augusta, Georgia, I experienced a bit of culture shock. The high school I went to, of course, was integrated, but the kids divided themselves. Pockets of White kids and Black kids (the Asian Americans and the Indian Americans could mix in where they pleased) stood on different sides of the Commons Area, ate at different lunch tables. I suppose this would have happened in Illinois, as I moved from junior high into high school, but I found it strange. My Black friends weren't considered "Black" since they were in college prep classes. One was a cheerleader, the only African-American student on the squad. No one was burning crosses and the days of lynching were thankfully long gone, but there was tension, an insidious tension that I felt, that my friends felt, that all of us who carefully walked the color boundary felt.

This became more apparent to me when I started my career as a young educator. I'd landed a plum job as an English and theatre teacher in a rural Georgia high school. The school was primarily African American. Multicultural wisdom was just making the rounds. It was to be on our radars as teachers. I had two remedial English classes per day. Only one of my students was White. In my theatre classes, the ratio was the exact opposite. This angered me and I sought to include students of all races in the afterschool theatre program. Soon, though, I was warned to be careful in terms of my casting—no interracial couples in romantic roles. The Ku Klux Klan was still active in the county I was teaching in. This was 1996. Call me naïve, but I was shocked.

Why I Write About Race and Class
Kekla Magoon, author of *The Rock and the River*:

I grew up in a predominantly White community in northeast Indiana. As a young person, I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about race. It wasn't a huge problem for me, day to day, though I believe my early experiences of straddling race and class divisions affected me deeply. As a biracial woman with a White American mother and Black African father, I never quite fit into either the Black community or the White community, but this is much more apparent to me looking back. At the time, I was able to rely on my upper middle class socioeconomic status to keep me in honors classes and to make it socially acceptable for me to be spending time with large groups of White students. The vast majority of my friends were White, though we had a fairly strong African-American student presence in my high school.

As I emerged from the cocoon of my hometown, I began to see that my particular experience of Blackness was as important as my ability to assimilate into a White community. However, as a biracial person, it remains difficult to find a place to fit in racially, even in adulthood. My cultural background doesn't jive with that of most Black Americans, or of any White Americans. This often keeps racial issues at the forefront of my mind.

I've always been interested in Black history, and I've struggled to understand all the ways it relates to and intersects with my own life experience. Writing *The Rock and the River* emerged from my exploration of the civil rights movement and the decisions young people had to make at the time—between non-violence and militancy, between standing in silence and taking a stand, between finding ways to diffuse anger or simply letting it rage.

Excerpt from *Between Us Baxters* Readers' Theatre

- Bus Driver:** Listen, gal, that ain't my problem. I just need you off this bus, and now.
- Narrator 1:** I could see the red creeping up his pale neck, like ketchup dribbled onto grits.
- Bus Driver:** You're disturbing the other riders.
- Narrator 2:** Why, this wasn't fair. Not fair at all. The woman set her son, still bawling, down beside her. Hurriedly, she grabbed up her things.
- Woman on Bus:** Ssh, ssh, hush now.
- Narrator 2:** All the eyes that had been staring, making hateful glances, one by one, looked away. Big bullies. All of them. Just like Sally Jean. Just like whoever threw those bricks. I inched my butt off the seat and dug in my pocket for the nickel I knew was there. When we got back from Fulbrights, Henri gave it to me as payment for going with Timbre Ann to run to the store for the eggs the Judge needed.
- Mama:** Polly!
- Narrator 1:** Mama put her hand on my arm. Her way of telling me no, to stay seated. I stayed where I was.
- Narrator 2:** When the driver was satisfied the woman and her boy were leaving, he turned, made his way back to the front of the bus. I caught the lady just as she was about to get off.
- Polly:** Here.
- Narrator 1:** A nickel wouldn't stop Timbre Ann from seeing me as a white girl first and as her forever-friend second, but I had to do something.
- Polly:** It's not a full fare but it's enough for a lollipop.

Excerpt from *The Rock and the River* Readers' Theatre

- Shop Clerk:** Put it back.
- Narrator 3:** The voice startled me, and I turned. The old man behind the counter glared at me.
- Sam:** What?
- Shop Clerk:** I said, put it back.
- Narrator 1:** He moved out from behind the counter and approached me, shaking his fist.
- Sam:** Put what back?
- Shop Clerk:** Don't give me sass, boy. You think I can't see?
- Narrator 4:** He came up and grabbed my wrist, yanking my hand out of my pocket.
- Narrator 2:** Two dollar bills and some coins dropped onto the floor as he pried open my fingers.
- Sam:** I don't understand. I didn't take anything.