

## Teaching Both Books Together

**Comparative Discussion:** *Between Us Baxters* and *THE ROCK AND THE RIVER*

### For Group Discussion

At the close of *Between Us Baxters*, a meeting is being held at Biggs Repair to discuss a response to the racially-motivated fires. At the beginning of *The Rock and the River*, Sam participates in a public protest, as he has many times before. Discuss how organizing/protesting became a more public practice between the years 1959 to 1968. Have students compile a timeline of key events in the Civil Rights Movement. How did these events motivate people to stand up for what they believed in?

How does the Southern, small town setting impact Polly's day-to-day life? How does the Northern, big city setting impact Sam's? Compare and contrast how each setting shapes the main character's perceptions and how they are able to take action within their communities.

Discuss the role of law enforcement in both books. How are police officers represented? Talk about the concepts of power and corruption: in what ways do justice and injustice have a strong role in each novel?

### Essay Topics

Compare and contrast the ways that class and race are a part of each story. What do these books say about this era in history? How are the themes still relevant today?

Discuss how family dynamics are depicted in each novel. How are the families alike and how are the Baxters and the Childs different? How is each a reflection of the year the novel is set?

### Additional Activities

Have students imagine Sam and Polly as pen-pals (alternately, students could choose Maxie and Timbre Ann). What would they write to each other? How might they explain what is going on in their respective communities during the civil rights movement? Write a letter from each character to the other.

Ask students to build a word pyramid to represent either the block tower or the nest, or both, using words/phrases that speak to the story's theme or its impact on them.

### Bethany and Kekla would love to visit your classroom or school!

They offer joint and individual presentations and writing workshops. For scheduling and further information, contact:

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### Book Information

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## About the Authors



**Kekla Magoon** holds an MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and a BA in History from Northwestern University. She is a full-time author/writer and speaker. *The Rock and the River* is her first novel. She also writes non-fiction for young adults. Kekla has worked with several youth-serving non-profit organizations, and has over ten years of experience leading education and enrichment programs for youth and adults. Her second novel, a contemporary middle-grade, is forthcoming from Aladdin/Simon & Schuster.

**Bethany Hegedus** has spent time above and below the Mason-Dixon Line. While she currently makes her home in Brooklyn, New York she spent her formative years in Georgia. Bethany cares deeply about kids, having once been a high school teacher and also a youth advocate. She serves as a mentor in the PEN Prison Writing Program and holds an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Forthcoming, is the middle-grade novel *The One...The Only...Maebelle T. (for No Talent) Earl* with Delacorte Press. *Between Us Baxters* is her first young-adult novel.



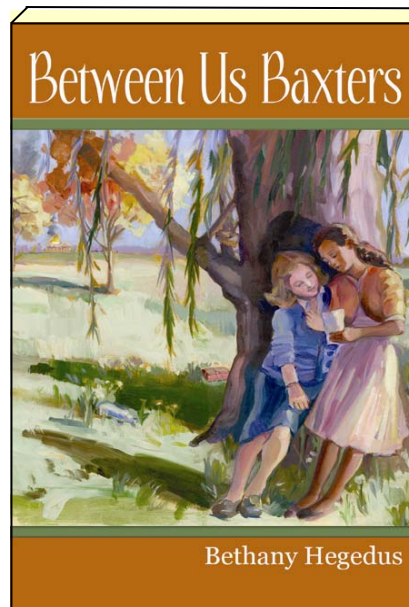
# The Movement

A Decade of Change: Civil Rights in America 1959-1968

**CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION GUIDE**  
Two books that bring the civil rights era to life

### *Between Us Baxters*

by Bethany Hegedus



**1959, Georgia.** In Holcolm County, Polly Baxter's already rocky life is shaken to the core when a series of racially motivated fires burns through her small town. Polly learns not only to listen to her heart, but to act from it.

Polly Baxter has always been friends with Timbre Ann Biggs. It may matter to everyone else that their skins are different colors, but they don't mind being "salt and pepper" friends. Or at least Polly doesn't. Raised firmly with her mother's belief that "you can't pick your family but you can pick your friends," Polly clings to her friendship with Timbre Ann. After all, it's Timbre Ann who quizzes her on her vocabulary words and whose hand-me-downs she wears. It's also Timbre Ann who Polly begins to keep secrets from, including her daddy's drinking. However, Timbre Ann has a way of knowing things about the Baxters, even when it isn't Polly who shares them with her. When black-owned businesses begin to burn, Polly struggles to cope with the implication that her family may be involved and to understand the true meaning of friendship.

#### THEMATIC ELEMENTS:

**SEGREGATION & INTEGRATION CLASS DIFFERENCES**  
**FAMILY & COMMUNITY COURAGE FEAR FRIENDSHIP**

### *The Rock and the River*

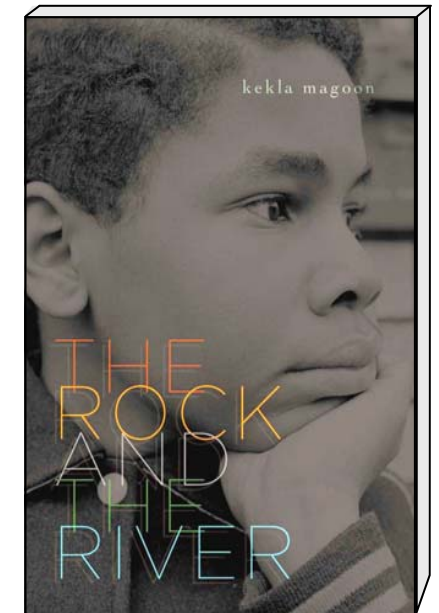
by Kekla Magoon

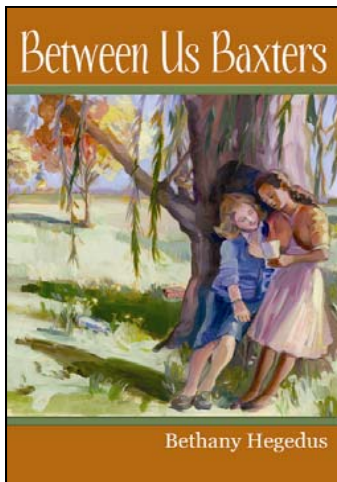
**1968, Chicago.** For thirteen-year-old Sam, it's not easy being the son of well-known civil rights leader Roland Childs — especially when his older brother (and best friend) Stick, begins to drift away from him. Sam has always had faith in his father, but when he finds literature about the Black Panthers under Stick's bed, he's not sure who to believe: his father or his brother. Suddenly, nothing feels certain anymore.

Sam wants to believe that his father is right: You can effect change without violence. But as time goes on, Sam grows weary of standing by and watching as his friends and family suffer at the hands of racism in their community. He begins to explore the Panthers with Stick, but soon he's involved in something far more serious — and more dangerous — than he could have predicted. Sam is faced with a difficult decision. Will he follow his father or his brother? His mind or his heart? The rock or the river?

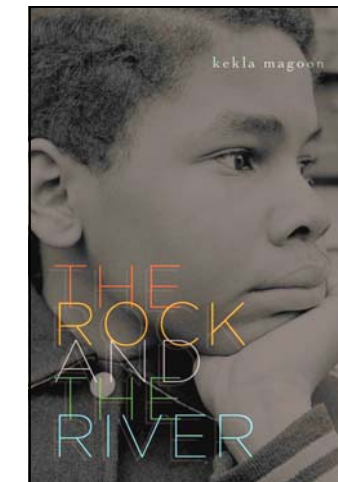
#### THEMATIC ELEMENTS:

**BROTHERHOOD NON-VIOLENCE CHOICE POVERTY**  
**FAMILY & COMMUNITY RACISM SOCIAL CHANGE**





# Classroom Connections



## Pre-Reading Activity

Ask the students to read the Brown vs. the Board of Education ruling and then have them write a short paper about how the world would look today if Brown vs. the Board of Education had not passed in 1954. Encourage students to share their writing in class.

## Theme Exploration

### Segregation & Integration

Since Brown vs. the Board of Education was passed in 1954, ask students why in 1959 are Polly and Timbre Ann attend segregated schools. Who opposes integration and why? How does Polly feel about segregation? Discuss Mama's reaction to Polly when she gives black mother on the bus a nickel before they are "put off." Explain what Mama means when she says, "You did the right thing, baby-girl, but depending on who's watching right can be wrong." (p. 79)

### Family & Community

Polly considers herself to be a "black-sheep-Baxter." Ask students to discuss, what being a black-sheep means? Does this metaphor tie into the racial stereotypes the county of Holcolm sets forth? In what ways is Timbre Ann's family more stable than Polly's? Is Polly's definition of family the same at the end of the novel as it is in the opening? Is Timbre Ann's? Discuss the role of family throughout the novel. How important is family to Polly? Do all members of Polly's family see eye to eye when it comes to race relations?

How is Timbre Ann seen within the black community? Ask students to cite examples of how this differs with how she is seen in the white community.

### Courage

Ask students to define courage. Discuss some of the courageous acts that take place on Polly's part? Where does she fall short? When Daddy throws the rifle into the fire near the end of the novel, is this a courageous or cowardly act? Does Peter, Timbre Ann's boyfriend act courageous? Have students write a short paper on which character's courageous action most surprises.

### Fear

How much a part of Polly's daily life is fear? Is she ever threatened and by whom? Discuss why the black-owned businesses are attacked. How is fear used as a method to keep people in line? When the brick is first thrown through the window of Biggs Repair, is Timbre Ann afraid? Why or why not?

### Friendship

Discuss the ways Polly falls short of being a good friend to Timbre Ann. How is the friendship between Henri and Lisbeth depicted? In what ways, is it clear that Timbre Ann is outgrowing Polly? How does this make Polly feel? Ask the students to write a brief opinion paper on whether or not they think Polly and Timbre Ann maintain a friendship after the novel ends.

## Pre-Reading Activity

Read The Black Panther Party's Ten Point Platform. Discuss the meaning behind each of the statements, and the overall goal of securing "land, bread, housing, clothing, justice, education and peace." Discuss the relevance of these goals today, and if these issues still relate to your community.

## Theme Exploration

### Brotherhood

Discuss the relationship between Sam and his brother, Stick. Cite moments in which the brothers strive to protect each other. Sam is attached to the block tower he built with Stick. Does it have significance to Stick, as well? Why does Stick turn to the block tower as a hiding place for the gun? How is the tower a symbol for the brothers' shifting relationship? How does each of the brothers' individual relationship with Father affect their interactions?

### Non-Violence

Discuss how the non-violent civil rights movement is portrayed throughout the novel. Identify instances in the story when violence occurs. How does each character react? For example, when Bucky is attacked and arrested, how does the community respond? As a reader, how did you feel when this happened to Bucky? Compare/contrast your feelings to Sam's. Compare the activities and goals of the civil rights movement with those of The Black Panther Party. How are they alike?

### Choice

What does Stick mean when he tells Sam, "You can't be the rock and the river?" How do the brothers' choices differ? Discuss Sam's struggle to choose the right path. Name the choices Sam makes that lead to the climax of the novel. Could the novel have ended differently? If so, what actions would Sam have had to change?

### Racism

Where does Sam encounter racism in his community? How does he deal with what he sees? Talk about the role of anger in the story. Which characters feel angry? Why? How do different characters, such as Sam, Stick, Raheem and Father, deal with their anger? How does this affect the choices each character makes?

### Poverty

How are class and poverty portrayed throughout the novel? For example, when Maxie fights with Sam (p.150-153), she states: "They [the police] don't need a reason. Maybe they do up where you live, but they sure don't down here." Later, Sam retorts that Maxie's family is "stuck up here in the ghetto." What is Sam saying about her neighborhood? Why does this hurt her feelings?

### Family & Community

Sam is shocked to learn that his father is giving legal advice to The Black Panthers. Were you as startled as Sam was? Why or why not?

What does Mama mean when she tells Sam that Father and Stick are very much the same? Do you agree? How does this statement relate to Sam's realization at the end of the story?

## Beyond the Books

Ask students to interview grandparents or others in their lives that may have been alive during the Civil Rights era. Question them specifically about Jim Crow laws and what they knew about Brown vs. the Board of Education and how it impacted their lives. Also delve into the assassination of Dr. King, and discuss how their community responded. Where, when and how did they first hear the news?

Explore the role of popular music and/or protest songs throughout the decade of change (1959-1968). Play songs from the era for your class and discuss the social significance of the lyrics. Ask students to identify a recent popular song that speaks to today's social ills.

## Related Resources

### Helpful web links:

National Visionary Leadership Project  
[www.visionaryproject.org](http://www.visionaryproject.org)

History of the Jim Crow laws  
[www.jimcrowhistory.com](http://www.jimcrowhistory.com)

Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta  
[www.cchrpartnership.org](http://www.cchrpartnership.org)

King Center  
[www.thekingcenter.org](http://www.thekingcenter.org)

The Black Panther Party History  
[www.blackpanther.org](http://www.blackpanther.org)

### Books to share:

*Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories*, Ellen Levine

*A Dream of Freedom: The Civil Rights Movement from 1954-1968*, Diane McWhorter

*Yankee Girl*, Maryann Rodham

*The Watsons Go To Birmingham: 1963*, Christopher Paul Curtis

*A Thousand Never Evers*, Shana Burg

*Seattle Blues*, Michael Wenberg

**"In the end, we will not remember the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends."**

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

## Crossing the Curriculum

### Language Arts

The town paper, the *Holcolm Sentinel*, covers at least one of the fires--the one that took place at Mr. Castle's vacuum cleaner warehouse. Ask students to write a newspaper article depicting the facts around the fire at Biggs Repair. Include comments from local citizens who were on the scene. Discuss what facts may or may not have been left out of the articles, were they written in 1959 and not today.

### Drama

Polly and Timbre Ann both have favorite television programs, *Leave it to Beaver*, is Polly's and *Perry Mason* is Timbre Ann's. At the end of the novel, Polly intends to write Timbre Ann and to sign the letters, June Mason, so no one will know they come from Polly. Have students write two letters, one to Timbre Ann from Polly and one from Timbre Ann in return. Ask the students to read the letters and perform them as monologues.

### Vocabulary

Students should try to define unfamiliar words using context clues. Some words include: monetary (p.24),

nary (p.51), proceeding(s) (p.60), ritual (p.63), consoling (p.76) peculator (p.89), lollygag (p.93), reminisce(d) (p.106), parlor (p.109), chauffeur (p.137), nauseous (p.140), undertow (p.143), fortifying (p.151), engrave(d) (p.169), exterior (p. 198), pallbearer (p.205), sacrifice(s) (p.217), conscience (p.225), Molotov cocktail (p.230), coil(ed) (p.263), cremated (p.287), taut (p. 298), solemn (p. 300).

**Radical simply means "grasping things at the root."**

—Angela Davis

## Crossing the Curriculum

### Language Arts

Pretend you are a journalist in 1968 Chicago. Write an article about the events surrounding Bucky's trial. Include facts about his arrest, the demonstration, and his release.

At the end of the book, Sam tells Leroy that he's going home. Try to imagine what might have happened when he got there. Write a short scene between Sam and Father that might have taken place that night.

### Social Studies

Read the author's note at the end of the book. Write an essay comparing and contrasting the goals and activities of the civil rights movement and The Black Panther Party. Write about the different kinds of community organizing that occurred. How did the Black Panthers work in the community? How did the civil rights movement motivate people to act? You may also wish to discuss how community organizing is relevant today.

### Vocabulary

Here are some words to define using context clues, if possible: consequences (p.13), reverent(ly) (p.27), condone (p.77), realign (p.81), glimpse

(p.88), perpetual (p.93), prominent (p.95), disperse (p.107), immovable (p.113), aloft (p.125), reprimand (p.132), engulf(ed) (p.133), guillotine (p.136), incredulity (p.137), pry (p.148), crevice (p.149), scrawl (p.164), aroma (p.166), holster (p.171), directive(s) (p.176), flail(ing) (p.177), respective (p.178), precarious(ly) (p.179), hypocrisy (p.193), fuse (p.220), deliberating (p.237), mourner(s) (p.266).