

Extraordinary Women from U.S. History: Readers Theatre for Grades 4-8. Chari R. Smith. Portsmouth, NH: Teacher Ideas Press, 2003. 150 pages, \$25.00 paper.

Extraordinary Women from U.S. History provides teachers in grades 4-8 with all the materials and ideas needed to use "Readers Theatre" as a teaching strategy in their classrooms. The author emphasizes teaching women's history rather than staging a classroom play. The book's Introduction gives teachers practical and creative methods for initiating "Readers Theatre" by describing how to position the players, and ways to engage as many students as possible. For example, the author suggests dividing the class into two groups who then read the play to each other, thus reinforcing the historical content. When presenting to parents, she urges students to enhance their presentations by creating a simple backdrop painted on cardboard boxes or other materials. Teachers could also enlist the help of an art teacher in creating these backdrops. The first chapter presents warm up activities and stresses ways to teach students to become good readers such as changing facial expressions and using different voices and walking steps. The author also describes several improvisational activities to help students develop the fundamentals of acting. While not necessary for presenting "Readers Theatre," these procedures can help students develop stage confidence and acquire additional skills.

The women selected for the book provide a diversity of characters and achievements that should interest most students. Each reading focuses on a dramatic episode in the life of an "extraordinary" woman. The selection includes: Sacagawea and *Her Journey West*; Susan B. Anthony's *Fight For Women's Rights*; Harriet Tubman's *Road to Freedom*; Elizabeth Blackwell's struggles to become the *First Woman Doctor*; *The Tale of a Journalist* by Nellie Bly; Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Growing Up a Pioneer*; Eleanor Roosevelt as *Eleanor*; and Babe Didrikson Zaharias *Beginnings*. Each script divides into several scenes described by a narrator and concludes with an epilogue summarizing each character's final years. The cast includes two narrators as well as optional characters designed to increase the number of student participants if needed.

Each of the eight chapters includes a brief lesson plan consisting of background information and varied directions for staging a "Readers Theatre." The "Background" sets the context for each "extraordinary" life. "Presentation Suggestions," such as backdrops and staging for different members of the cast, vary for each woman. Each lesson plan concludes with creative follow up activities. These differ for each chapter and include such ideas as writing parts of the play to include additional characters or historical or imagined circumstances, questions to get students to think historically, ideas for improvisation, and writing activities such as developing a journal using quotes from Eleanor Roosevelt's syndicated column, "My Day." The book also provides an excellent template for those teachers who want to write their own scripts on topics other than women in U.S. History. The scripts, written for 4th to 8th graders, can be read in twenty to thirty minutes, thus leaving sufficient class time for exploring the historical events surrounding each woman's experience. Hence the presentation becomes a learning activity with the script merely the medium for engaging students in a historical message. "Readers Theatre" presents an excellent and realistic alternative when teachers, pressed for time, must often choose between student learning and student testing.

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