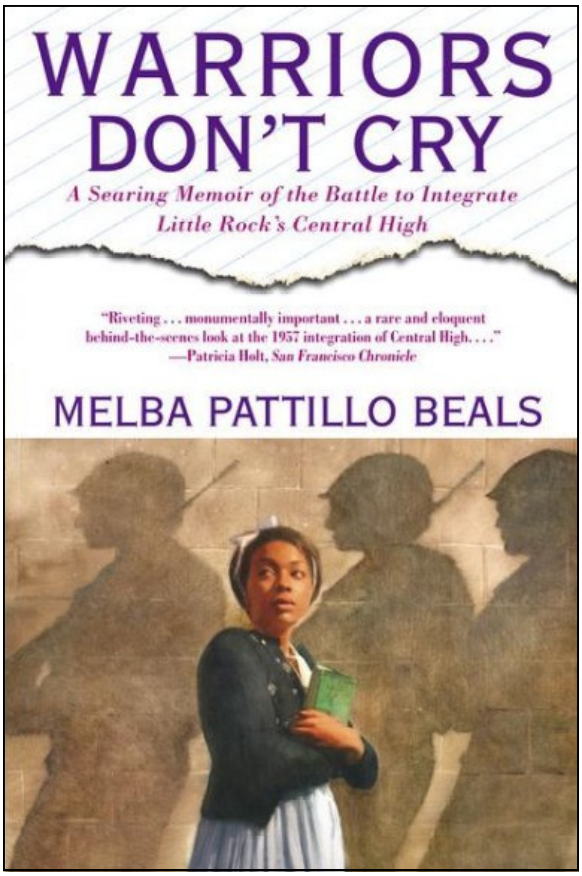

Books in a Box

Reading Guide

Blaine
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Maple Falls
Point Roberts
Sumas
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the best place to begin

whatcom county
library system

Books in a Box Information

We hope you will enjoy the convenience of having multiple copies of the same title to share—either with your official book group or with an unofficial friends-and-family group!

Some general information about the kits:

- Kits check out for six weeks.
- Kits are available to reserve, but we cannot guarantee their availability for specific dates.
- One person in the group is responsible for the kits full return.
- Return kits in person at any Whatcom County library

How do I find a list of all your kits?

- Go to www.wcls.org
- Click on "catalog"
- In the Subject Keyword Search type "book club kit"

This list includes kits owned by both Whatcom County and Bellingham Library Systems. Please note that the Bellingham kits must be picked up and returned to the Bellingham Library. Whatcom County kits can be reserved and sent to any location for pickup.

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Melba writes, "Black folks aren't born expecting segregation. . . . Instead the humiliating expectations and traditions of segregation creep over you slowly stealing a teaspoonful of your self-esteem each day" (3). How does Melba learn those expectations and traditions? What does she know about segregation by the time that she has reached the age of eight? What has she learned by the age of twelve?

2. What prompts Melba to raise her hand when a teacher asks who would like to attend Central High? Why do you think she does not tell her family that she has volunteered? What does she fear? How did Melba's parents and grandmother respond to the news that she had been chosen to attend Central High? Why do you think they allowed her to attend despite their fears?

3. How do the "humiliating expectations and traditions of segregation" shape the attitudes and actions of the adults in Melba's family? How do those "expectations and traditions" affect the way Melba views their ability to protect her and themselves from mistreatment?

4. In 1954, when Melba is just thirteen, a white man tries to rape her. How do the adults in Melba's family respond to the incident? Why do you think they decide not to call the police? What do they fear? How do those fears keep the family from bringing the attacker to justice? How do they affect the way Melba sees herself and others?

5. How did school and community leaders prepare for the desegregation of Central High? Whom did they consult? Whom did they leave out of the process? How important do you think these omissions will be?

6. Melba's grandmother likens Melba to a "warrior on the battlefield for you Lord." In what sense are Melba and the eight students "warriors"? What qualities do warriors have? Which of those qualities do you think they will need to make it through the school year?

7. What qualities does Melba attribute to Thurgood Marshall? Which of these qualities does she most admire? To what adults does she compare Thurgood Marshall? What does that comparison suggest about the way she views those adults? What does her comparison suggest about the effects of segregation?

8. Study the entries in Melba's diary. What does it suggest about the way attitudes begin to change? What kind of small gestures can make a huge impact on that process of changing attitudes?

9. Identify the various ways the word *integration* is used in this book. What does the word *integration* mean to Melba? To the other African American students at Central High? To white students there? How do you define the word?

10. Identify the strategies Melba and the other students develop in response to harassment at school. What are the advantages of each? What are the drawbacks?

11. How does Melba's grandmother suggest that Melba disarm her attackers? How effective is that strategy?

12. In 1997, Elizabeth Eckford was asked why she returned to Central High after her experience with the mob. She replied, "Somewhere along the line, very soon [staying at Central] became an obligation. I realized that what we were doing was not for ourselves." What is that obligation? How do you think it shapes Melba's determination to remain at Central High despite the hostility and injustice she experiences?

13. How do some individuals and groups in the African American community show their support for Melba and the other eight students? Why are some individuals and groups in the African American community critical of the efforts of the nine students to integrate Central High? What does their lack of support mean to Melba?

14. What risks is Link taking in offering Melba his friendship? What risks is Melba taking in becoming friends with Link? Why are Melba's mother and grandmother suspicious of Link's motives in befriending Melba?

15. What does Ernest Green's graduation from Central High School mean to African Americans in Little Rock, Arkansas? Why is it a matter of such concern to segregationists? The Greens secretly arrange for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and a reporter for a black newspaper to attend Ernest's graduation. Why were they invited? What does their presence suggest about the effect the nine students have had on African Americans throughout the nation?

16. Melba writes that "the newspapers said Ernie's diploma cost the taxpayers half a million dollars. Of course, we knew it cost all of us much more." What does she mean?

17. Why do you think Melba comes to see her Central High experience as "a positive force that has shaped the course of my life"? How has it shaped her identity?

18. What is the meaning of the title, *Warriors Don't Cry?*

19. How does Melba change in the course of the book? To what experiences does she attribute those changes? To what experiences do you attribute those changes? How has her year at Central High affected the way she sees herself and others?

Author Bio: Melba Pattillo Beals

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2009.

Melba Pattillo Beals was thrust into the spotlight in September 1957 at the age of fifteen as one of the "Little Rock Nine." She and eight other African American students were selected to attend Little Rock, Arkansas's all-white Central High School. Originally eighteen black students agreed to attend, but by the actual day, only nine were left. Realizing the groundbreaking nature of the Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education,* these nine teenagers endured violence and isolation as they became among the first black Americans to challenge openly the practice of educational segregation in the American South. According to Clarence Petersen's *Tribune Books* review of her 1994 work, *Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High,* Beals "emerged from the struggle strengthened by faith, courage, and hope." Beals was encouraged and went on to become a television news reporter for the National Broadcasting Network (NBC) in San Francisco, a public relations expert, and eventually a writer.

Both her mother and grandmother played a prominent role in guiding the young Beals forward and supporting her attendance at Central High. Jervey Tervalon, wrote in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* that "Beals's grandmother, India, is a follower of Ghandi's teachings and impressed upon her granddaughter the importance and need for personal sacrifice to accomplish even modest social change."

In 1999 Beals published a follow-up to *Warriors Don't Cry* called *White Is a State of Mind.* Published the same year Beals was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest civilian honor, her second memoir continues where the first left off. Fearful of external threats, Beals was sponsored by the NAACP chapter in Santa Rosa, California. There she lived with a white family, the McCabes, who provided a safe haven for her to finish her education. Beals describes the personal growth she experienced after graduating from high school, her university education, marriage, divorce, and poverty.

Reviews

Kirkus Reviews

★ *Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High School,* Melba Pattillo Beals. Washington Square Press, $15.00 (312p) ISBN 978-0-316-01368-0

A profoundly uplifting--and also a profoundly depressing- -account of the integration of Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. Forty years ago, when the US Supreme Court declared that school segregation was unconstitutional in Brown v. Board of Education, Beals was a schoolgirl in Little Rock. She knew that the good school in Little Rock, the one that would prepare her best for college, was Central High, and she wanted to be in the first group of black teenagers to integrate the school. Not everyone in her family or in the black population of the city supported her dream, fearing that such boat-rocking would bring a reign of violence. This memoir, based heavily on Beals's schoolgirl diary and her English-teacher mother's notes, explains how the 15-year-old decided to integrate Central High with eight classmates and what happened as a result of that decision. Beals's narrative is uplifting because she survived the ordeal, went on to college at San Francisco State University and Columbia University, worked as a reporter for NBC, and returned to Little Rock in 1987 to be greeted by then-governor Bill

Clinton and a black Central High student-body president. The tale is depressing because unrelenting violence permeates every page, making a reader wonder (not for the first time, sadly) how human beings can harbor so much hatred. The violence jumps out of every paragraph for entire chapters--violence begat by Beals's white classmates, their parents, Little Rock rednecks with no connection to Central High, even the school's teachers. Arkansas governor Orval Faubus tacitly, and sometimes overtly, encouraged the violence. The goal was to drive the nine black students away from Central High before they could graduate. President Eisenhower responded by calling in federal troops to enforce the law, turning Central High into an armed battleground. The sense of immediacy in Beals's well-crafted account makes the events seem like they happened yesterday.

You've gotta learn to defend yourself. Never let your enemy know what you are feeling.
-- The soldier assigned to protect Melba

Please, God, let me learn how to stop being a warrior. Sometimes I just need to be a girl.
-- Melba's diary, on her sixteenth birthday

Suggested Readalikes

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, by Maya Angelou.

White is a State of Mind, by Melba Beals.

Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63, by Taylor Branch.

Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years, by Sarah and A. Elizabeth Delany.

The Misfits, by James Howe.

Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement, by John Lewis.

Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama: The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution, by Diane McWhorter.

Coming of Age in Mississippi, by Anne Moody.

The Little Rock School Desegregation Crisis in American History, by Robert Somerlott.

Remember Little Rock: The Time, the People, the Stories, by Paul Robert Walker.

Web Resources

Melba Beals personal website: www.melbabeals.com

The Little Rock Central H.S. 40th Anniversary website: www.centralhigh57.org

50th Anniversary TIME magazine article: www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1663841,00.html

Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture entry: www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=723

U.S. Army video documenting Operation Arkansas: www.army.mil/arkansas/