

# School Desegregation Depicted in Docudrama

*Six films depicting school desegregation reviewed for classroom teachers* — David L. Wolfford

**May 17 marks the fiftieth anniversary** of the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, which reversed the Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896, and ordered the desegregation of schools. Today's students are far removed from the pre-*Brown* South and many of their parents do not recall the Civil Rights era, which makes the teacher's task very challenging. Movies are among the resources that social studies teachers can use to give students a feel for that era. Many of them depict the NAACP's efforts to integrate southern schools and help convey the legal, political, and social issues surrounding school desegregation.

This composite review will examine the content and accuracy of six films, to aid teachers in choosing a docudrama for their classroom. These movies are suitable for U.S. history, government, sociology, or psychology classes and are available from online vendors such as Amazon.com and Social Studies School Service (SSSS), or from public libraries and video stores. Docudrama has opened doors for writers "who could espouse controversial ideas in a relatively safe historical format." This has made it "easier and cheaper to present fictional entertainment under the guise of realism than to attempt meticulous factual re-creation," allowing artistic license to change historic reality for the common viewer.<sup>1</sup> For the most part, these films properly convey the times and experiences from the era, and thus make legitimate teaching tools. Yet producers also took some liberties, as this review will indicate.

*CRISIS AT CENTRAL HIGH, 1980, Time-Life, 120 minutes, not rated, directed by LaMont Johnson (Amazon, VHS \$9.94; SSSS, VHS \$14.95).* This made-for-television movie concerning school desegregation aired on CBS in February 1981 and summarized the 1957-58 Little Rock, Arkansas, conflict through its main character, teacher-administrator Elizabeth Huckaby (Joanne Woodward). The trials and tribulations of both the incoming black students (the Little Rock Nine) and faculty are shown, however Huckaby's viewpoint is paramount. Additional issues include the state-federal conflict between President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Gov. Orval Faubus, the National Guard and the 101st Airborne, and segregationists' treatment of African American students.

*SEPARATE BUT EQUAL, 1991, Republic Pictures, 193 minutes, rated PG, directed by George Stevens, Jr. (Amazon, VHS \$9.98, DVD \$13.48; SSSS, VHS \$14.98).* This lengthy film was also made for television and covers the NAACP's struggle and strategy

to integrate southern schools through the federal courts, focusing on the *Briggs v. Elliott* case from South Carolina, one of the four companion cases to *Brown*. Producers chose *Briggs* because Thurgood Marshall (Sydney Poitier) argued this case, while assistants Robert Carter (Clevon Little) and Jack Greenberg (John Rothman) represented plaintiffs in other states. South Carolina Gov. Jimmy Byrnes (John McMartin) defends segregation with the legal expertise of John W. Davis (Burt Lancaster), noted lawyer and 1924 Democratic presidential nominee. In fact, Davis carried the South, but lost the election. Other characters include Chief Justice Earl Warren (Richard Kiley) and Associate Justice Felix Frankfurter (Mike Nussbaum). This film won the 1991 Emmy award for Best Mini-Series.

*SIMPLE JUSTICE, 1993, New Images & PBS's The American Experience, 133 minutes, directed by Helaine Head (difficult to locate for purchase).* This presentation is based on Richard Kluger's 1975 book by the same name and parallels *Separate But Equal*, including many of the same characters. It differs, however, in that this film begins with Thurgood Marshall (Peter Francis James) at Howard Law School and properly credits Professor Charles Houston (James Avery) as brainchild of the NAACP's legal strategy to desegregate.

*THE ERNEST GREEN STORY, 1993, Walt Disney Pictures, 101 minutes, not rated, directed by Eric Laneuville. (Amazon, used from \$44.95; SSSS, new VHS \$99.00).* This teleplay first aired on the Disney Channel and follows the Little Rock conflict from an African American perspective. Ernest Green (Morris Chestnut) is the senior member of the Little Rock Nine, who faced additional harassment because he was the first black graduate of the school. His grandfather (Ossie Davis) helps young Ernest cope with the difficulties of integrating Central High. Thurgood Marshall and Arkansas NAACP leader Daisy Bates appear, but the viewer experiences the Little Rock crisis mostly through Green and his African American classmates.

*RUBY BRIDGES, 1998, Walt Disney Pictures, 90 minutes, not rated, directed by Euzhan Palcy. (Amazon, VHS \$9.99, DVD \$17.99).* This *Wonderful World of Disney* presentation shows the sole young black student, Ruby Bridges (Chaz Monet), integrate the previously all-white Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, 1960. Newly hired Barbara Henry (Penelope Ann Miller) taught young Ruby alone in an isolated classroom. Bridges' story has been

publicized through various media since that turbulent year, making this 1998 movie a somewhat belated project. She is immortalized in a Norman Rockwell painting, stars in a chapter of John Steinbeck's *Travels With Charley*, and is the subject of Robert Coles's (Kevin Pollak) study on desegregation.

REMEMBER THE TITANS, *Walt Disney Pictures*, 114 minutes, rated PG, directed by Boaz Yakin. (Amazon, VHS \$20.00, DVD \$28.04; SSSS, VHS \$14.98, DVD \$19.98). This film, which covers more recent history, examines the results of busing for racial balance in Alexandria, Virginia. African American football coach Herman Boone (Denzel Washington) replaces the popular white coach Bill Yoast (Will Patton) in an attempt to smooth this transition. Whites in the community dislike the "forced integration" and are particularly critical of the new coach. Football players, as well, are reluctant to interact with their black teammates, but soon adjust to the new integrated setting and set an example for the student body at large.

### Major Film Themes

Desegregation had many dimensions: legal, political, and emotional, as well as educational. Teachers interested in the use of docudramas in class may wish to focus specifically on one or two of these dimensions. The following discussion will help teachers to determine which film best matches their teaching objectives.

### Legal Principles

*Separate But Equal* and *Simple Justice* analyze the legal principles at issue, elaborate on the federal courts' institutional role, and present the NAACP's strategy to overturn *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). *Simple Justice* provides a more thorough background on the 1896 precedent and a better understanding of how Thurgood Marshall grew intellectually. Marshall came from a modest Baltimore home, but had never witnessed the severe poverty and lack of education black children suffered in the Deep South until he traveled with Charles Houston, researching the inequities resulting from segregation. *Simple Justice* shows a particular eye-opening experience when Marshall witnesses a young impoverished black boy stymied by a piece of unfamiliar fruit. According to biographer Juan Williams, Marshall went through a metamorphosis after this event, transforming him from good-time Thurgood to "Mr. Civil Rights." *Separate But Equal*, however, opens in Clarendon County, South Carolina, in 1950, and ends with the Court's 1954 ruling, when Marshall was already popular in African American legal circles.<sup>2</sup>

These films often lack suspense—older students know the Supreme Court outcome before viewing—yet both films reveal suspenseful moments from the period and elaborate on the process involved in striking down *Plessy*. Obtaining African American plaintiffs brave enough to withstand segregationist harassment and patient enough to endure the lengthy court battle was perhaps the NAACP's most difficult task. War veterans were quicker to challenge Jim Crow because they had fought for freedom overseas only to return to injustices back home. Witnessing integrated settings in other nations also encouraged black fathers to seek equality for their children. The real life characters Harry Briggs, Abon Bridges,

and Ernest Green's grandfather, refer to their wartime experiences as motivators in fighting for democracy and equality on the home front.

These films serve first as an authority on desegregation, but also as a primer on the Supreme Court. Neither litigants nor the public predicted a unanimous decision. In both *Separate But Equal* and *Simple Justice*, NAACP lawyers try to pinpoint each justice's opinion before arguing the case. Other scenes depict justices and lawyers engaging in dialogue during oral arguments and the justices debating legal principle in closed chambers. Concepts involving the appeals process and the Court's operation will encourage student questions and stimulate classroom discussion.

### The Response of Southern Politicians

The South's anti-integration policies before *Brown* and the defiance of its government officials afterward are presented in all the films. *Separate But Equal* shows South Carolina Gov. James Byrnes attempting to pre-empt the integration order by upgrading black schools statewide. In *Crisis at Central High* and *Ruby Bridges*, news clips provide historical context for the viewer while revealing respective governors' strong opposition to the Court's order. Very early in *The Ernest Green Story* we see segregationists persuade Governor Faubus to delay integration in Little Rock. These scenes improve student understanding of the political machinery that stalled the Court's order. *Separate But Equal* avoids an oversimplification of good and evil: Byrnes and Davis are portrayed as ethical men interpreting the Constitution, as they understood it. In fact, Byrnes's only political defeat resulted from his refusal to support the Ku Klux Klan, and Davis often took cases for immigrants, laborers, and blacks.<sup>3</sup>

### The Emotional and Psychological Impact

Other depictions help to teach segregation's emotional or psychological impact. Classroom simulations and vivid photos from the civil rights era can be powerful teaching techniques. These movies, too, illustrate the emotional impact southern tradition had on the black child's psyche. *Separate But Equal* and *Simple Justice* explain Dr. Kenneth Clark's role in dismantling segregation. Clark placed black and white dolls in front of subjects and revealed how segregation affected self-esteem and instilled a sense of inferiority in young African Americans. The NAACP used Clark's findings to persuade the Court, and for the first time social science findings trumped legal precedent. *Ruby Bridges*, in particular, is told "from the emotional center of a child," showing her sessions with soon-to-be Harvard psychologist Robert Coles. Ruby, the only African American student at Frantz School in New Orleans, drew pictures revealing her desire to be white and refused to eat her packed lunches, fearing segregationists had poisoned her food.<sup>4</sup>

Within a few years after the *Brown* ruling, southern schools slowly desegregated. Little Rock went through delays, and extra court hearings, and is remembered for a horrendous conflict. Elizabeth Huckaby feared that reminding viewers of this controversial, somewhat taboo topic would "simply rip open old scars" and that southern defiance and bigotry might be exaggerated.

Scriptwriters handled this concern by making Huckaby, a law-abiding southern teacher who protects the nine African Americans, the central character. They also corrected journalists' exaggerated reporting of the 1957-58 school year. In *Crisis at Central High*, Huckaby scolds white teenage segregationists, becomes frustrated with the defiant governor, and helps newly admitted blacks cope with this trying situation. The film also reveals how the new medium of television likely distorted the opinion of the Little Rock majority. A *New York Times* reporter instigates a fight and local teachers are disgusted with how the "TV people had to liven things up." News clips resulting from staged reporting skewed the public's impression of Little Rock—a progressive southern city with an integrated university, public facilities, and buses by 1957. According to Superintendent Virgil Blossom, the vast majority of protestors gathered outside Central High arrived from out of state. That's not to say that members of the Little Rock Nine did not suffer a difficult time. *Ernest Green* reveals the hardships blacks experienced once admitted to white schools. Green deals with a bigoted coach who benches him and bigoted teammates who spread broken glass in the locker room shower floor before Ernest bathes.<sup>5</sup>

### Athletics

*Remember the Titans* is the rare case of a film on desegregation that was made for the big screen rather than television. The Supreme Court's 1971 *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg* decision empowered U.S. district courts with the very limited use of black-to-white enrollment ratios, resulting in busing for racial balance. *Titans* shows how a Virginia community dealt with court-ordered integration and cross-town busing, and emphasizes how high school athletics were crucial to the desegregation process. Typically, the camaraderie seen among the races in locker rooms did not occur so quickly upon integration, however, at times it certainly did facilitate race relations. White students who were athletes thought twice about boycotting schools when state or school rules required classroom attendance in order to play on Friday night, and talented black athletes were welcomed to school teams before average black students were welcomed into the classrooms. Bone-crunching scenes on the football field dominate while legal arguments, intimidation, and protests only set the stage for what became the championship season. Critics agreed that *Titans* was not the best history lesson. Roger Ebert declared, "life was perhaps harder and more wounding than the film." Another critic pointed out that the Motown soundtrack added joy to what was probably a much more miserable time.<sup>6</sup> Had producers of this movie focused more on the constitutional arguments around busing or failed to secure Denzel Washington as coach Boone, it would have spent even less time atop the box office's top ten.

### Historical Accuracy

The films contain some historical inaccuracies that should be noted. These include misleading newsreels, character manipulation, and depictions of the Supreme Court.<sup>7</sup>

Filmmakers often intertwine color docudrama with black and white reenactment. Some of these films use re-enacted newsreel clips with actors playing the real life roles, to place the viewer in

proper historical context. Pierre Sorlin claims the real danger here is that "spectators do not know where the material comes from and to what extent it is genuine. For many young viewers all black and white is automatically old, hence authentic, so that sequences borrowed from black and white fictions made a few years ago are ... considered ... veracious."<sup>8</sup>

In addition to misleading black and white footage, disclaimers warn that the films "add some fictional, composite characters" and create others "for dramatic continuity."<sup>9</sup> This character manipulation minimizes controversy or explores the unknown. Byrnes and Davis are treated respectfully in *Separate But Equal*, but other southern political legends are virtually omitted from these films to prevent offending viewers. In both the Little Rock and New Orleans cases, non-compliant governors defied the Court and argued for segregation's legality, which is precisely why these cases drew national attention. Yet *Ruby Bridges*, *Crisis at Central High*, and *The Ernest Green Story* barely recognize these champions of southern tradition, because producers did not want to glorify nor denounce them. Daisy Bates, the crusading Arkansas NAACP president and Little Rock Nine advocate, was replaced in *Crisis* with a more moderate "Mrs. Richards." The black press harshly criticized the film for overlooking Bates's contribution and asked why her narrative, *The Long Shadow of Little Rock*, was never considered in creating the screenplay.

In *Separate But Equal*, Justice Felix Frankfurter's fictional clerk "Mark" allows the viewer to explore Frankfurter's dilemma in deciding the *Brown* case. Frankfurter, a Jewish immigrant who understood social injustice, was also an ardent proponent of judicial restraint. He wrestled with his conscience before casting his vote in *Brown*. Mark reminds him of the Fourteenth Amendment's purpose, persuading Frankfurter to side with the NAACP. Critical viewers must question if the High Court's law clerks wielded such influence over their intellectual superiors.<sup>10</sup>

The films also include speculation as to how the Supreme Court reached its decision. Predicting the outcome of this case in the early 1950s was just as difficult as the films show. However, the debates in conference as depicted in *Separate But Equal* and *Simple Justice* may mislead. These discussions are not recorded. Justice William O. Douglas's strong stance against segregation was the most obvious and probably the only sure vote from the beginning.<sup>11</sup> But the emphatic, emotional diatribe Douglas delivers behind closed doors in *Separate But Equal* is probably more biting than the actual exchange at the time. The manner in which the Court reached unanimity is generally accepted by Supreme Court historians and portrayed fairly in the film. Though no solid record of justices' conversations leading to the decision is handy, memoirs and evidence offered from *real* clerks reveal that Stanley Reed initially desired to uphold *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and Warren convinced him, and others on the balance, to strike down segregation. *Separate But Equal* shows Warren making up his mind while touring Civil War sites with his African American driver, William Patterson. One morning at Manassas, Warren discovers Patterson sleeping in the car, having been refused lodging because of his race. The chief justice returns to Washington and rallies the Court to its



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Denzel Washington, portraying Coach Boone, in *Remember the Titans*.

unanimous opinion. Though the Manassas incident is not recorded, Supreme Court historian Bernard Schwartz credits Patterson with influencing Warren by telling him of his childhood in segregated New Orleans.<sup>12</sup>

All of the movies discussed here are appropriate, depending on age and course. *Ruby Bridges* is suited for the younger grades and *Remember the Titans* might better illustrate desegregation in sports, or how diverse groups reach common goals. *Separate But Equal* gives the most comprehensive story from the schoolhouse, the courthouse, and the White House. George Stevens, Jr., follows his father's model in this Emmy-winner, by presenting a "hero who is dissatisfied with society at large," striving to "diminish the gap between life as it is and life as it ought to be." Poitier, who portrays Thurgood Marshall well, originally turned down the offer, claiming, "I don't do television," but returned to the small screen after a thirty-five year absence. Complimentary reviews, competitive Nielsen ratings, and recognition from the Academy place this docudrama in a separate but *un-equal* category.<sup>13</sup> 📺

#### Notes

1. Tom W. Hoffer and Richard Alan Nelson, "Docudrama on American Television," in Alan Rosenthal, ed., *Why Docudrama? Fact-Fiction on Film and TV* (Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 70-71.
2. Juan Williams, *Thurgood Marshall: American Revolutionary* (New York: Times Books, 1998).

3. David Robertson, *Sly and Able: A Political Biography of James F. Byrnes* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 514.
4. Ted Johnson, "And a Small Child Lead Them," *TV Guide* (January 17, 1998): 32-35.
5. Ashley Franklin, "When Nine Children Went Through Fire," *TV Guide* (January 31, 1981), 21. Virgil Blossom, *It Has Happened Here* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 2.
6. Roger Ebert, "Remember the Titans," *Chicago Sun Times* (September 29, 2000); Paul Tatar, "Football as a Feel-good Experience," *CNN.com Reviewer* (September 28, 2000); Internet Movie Database "Remember the Titans," ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)).
7. Johnson, 32; Thomas H. Stahel, "Separate But Equal; The Exorcism," *America* (April 27, 1991): 472-73.
8. Tony Barta, *Screening the Past: Film and the Representation of History* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998), 211.
9. These disclaimers appear at the beginning of *Crisis at Central High* and *Ruby Bridges*. Ida Peters, "Lest We Forget ... The Little Rock Nine," *Afro-American* (February 7, 1981).
10. For information on Frankfurter's actual clerks or how the justice arrived at his decision, consult Joseph P. Lash, *From the Diaries of Felix Frankfurter* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1975).
11. David Robertson, *Sly and Able: A Political Biography of James F. Byrnes* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 516.
12. Bernard Schwartz, "Chief Justice Earl Warren: Superchief in Action," *Tulsa Law Review* 33, no. 2 (Winter 1997), 502.
13. Citations in this paragraph are from Earl Calloway, "ABC's *Separate But Equal* Stars Sidney Poitier in his Greatest Role," *Chicago Defender* (30 March 1991), Calloway, 21; Gene D. Phillips, *Major Film Directors of the American and British Cinema* (London: Associated University Press, 1999), 95; Stahel, 472; Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1994); Lisa Stein, "Drama of Landmark Civil Rights Case Brings Sydney Poitier Back to TV—After 30 years," *TV Guide* (6 April 1991), 20-21.

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