



# A Mighty Long Way

## My Journey to Justice at Little Rock Central High School

By Carlotta Walls LaNier with Lisa Frazier Page

Foreword by Bill Clinton

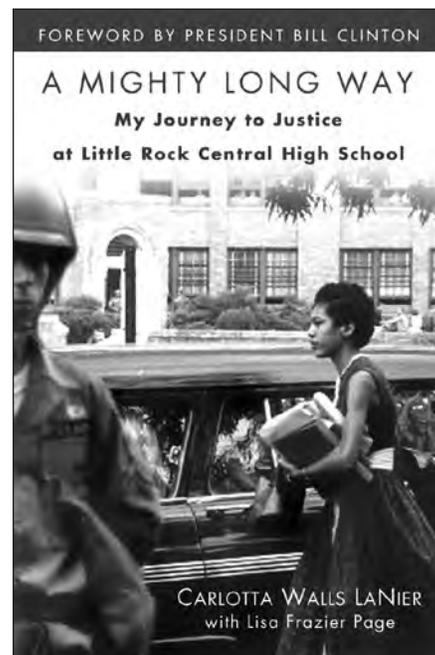
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“Carlotta Walls LaNier’s *A Mighty Long Way* is a riveting account of nine brave high school students and their families in a quest for quality desegregated public education. What happened in Little Rock in 1957 resulted in America’s greatest constitutional crisis since the Civil War. Carlotta’s account of events inside and outside Little Rock Central High School should be read and studied particularly by those who now walk through doors of opportunity which Carlotta and her schoolmates first opened over 50 years ago. When I started her book, I couldn’t put it down. It is a must-read.”

—James L. “Skip” Rutherford III, Dean of University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service

### • note to teachers •

Carlotta Walls LaNier’s book, *A Mighty Long Way*, begins with a simple and powerful premise: that education is priceless; and ends with an equally powerful conclusion: that every individual has the power to make a difference. When Carlotta Walls LaNier’s teacher passed around a sign-up sheet for those who wished to attend the previously all-white Little Rock Central High School, which had achieved a reputation as one of the best high schools in the nation, LaNier signed her name without hesitation. She simply desired the best education possible. She never imagined the violent outburst of hatred and intolerance which would come from members of the American South angered by the Supreme Court ruling that deemed segregation unconstitutional. In giving voice to the story of her decision to be one of the first students to participate in the desegregation of American schools, LaNier demonstrates the power and potential of a single individual.

Serving as both a personal story and a cultural document, *A Mighty Long Way* brings history to life, allowing students to consider a first-hand account of one of the most important events in American history and the ongoing pursuit of civil rights and equality. LaNier’s story is more than the story of a single young girl’s courageous perseverance in the face of adversity; it is also the story of the America we now inhabit, and the America we hope to have in the future. The guide which follows presents suggestions for using the book in a variety of classroom settings, and features teaching ideas which provide jumping off-points for consideration, ideas for discussion and essays, key terms and figures referenced in the text, and suggestions for further reading. Most importantly, while LaNier recounts events that happened over half a century ago, students will be encouraged to consider how her story speaks to them, personally, and what it has to offer today.

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## • about the book

Completed after the election of President Barack Obama, Carlotta Walls LaNier's *A Mighty Long Way* provides a timely look at a difficult and explosive period in American history when equality and civil rights were part reality and part lingering dream. Although more than fifty years have passed since children in the South such as LaNier and the other members of the Little Rock Nine integrated schools following the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling by the Supreme Court and the initiation of desegregation, the book's themes are as fresh today as they were so many years ago. The book speaks of that which we must not take for granted: the value of education, the power of the individual and community, and the courage and sacrifice required in order to secure a better future.

After remaining silent for so many years, LaNier tells the story of how she and eight other students changed the course of history when they made the decision to attend Little Rock Central High School, and how they persisted in the face of constant and growing persecution. Through telling her own tale of courage, and by sharing with students a journey which would culminate with the discovery of her own voice and its power, LaNier succeeds in conveying a broader story about human rights, social justice, education, racism, tolerance, understanding, the power of American democracy, and the potential of each one of us, as individuals, which makes democracy and the ideals of the Constitution more than just an American dream. In the tradition of the great American memoir, LaNier's own story illuminates the power of story-telling and provides testimony about our cultural and historical past, giving us direction for reflection and suggesting new ways of understanding for a better future. For in LaNier's revelation of her past and the pasts of the other members of the Little Rock Nine, their families, and the indomitable Daisy Bates, this is a story not just of growing up, but of growing, always—of how far we've come and how far we have yet to go.

## • about the authors

**CARLOTTA WALLS LANIER** is best known as the youngest member of the Little Rock Nine, the first wave of black students to begin the desegregation of American schools following the Supreme Court's long overdue determination that segregated schooling was unconstitutional. LaNier studied at Michigan State University before graduating from Colorado State College (now known as the University of Northern Colorado) in 1968, where she now serves on the board of trustees. She previously worked as a program administrator for the YMCA and then started her own real estate brokerage firm. She is a wife and mother of two children. With the other members of the Little Rock Nine and Daisy Bates, LaNier was awarded the Spingarn Medal by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1958. She has served as president of the Little Rock Nine Foundation, a scholarship organization which seeks to promote and maintain equal rights in education for all. LaNier holds two honorary doctorate degrees and has been recognized with countless other awards and accolades. In 1999, she, along with the other members of the Little Rock Nine, was honored by President Bill Clinton with a Congressional Gold Medal. She continues to lecture widely throughout the country.

**LISA FRAZIER PAGE** is an award-winning journalist and editor, as well as a wife and mother. She co-authored *The Pact: Three Young Men Make a Promise and Fulfill a Dream*, a best-selling book about three young men from Newark, New Jersey whose friendship fuels their success in becoming doctors. Page works for *The Washington Post*.

## • teaching ideas

Because of its thematic depth and cross-genre nature, *A Mighty Long Way* can be employed in a variety of classroom settings. If you are considering the book for use in a **literature or English** class, you might wish to begin with an exploration of genre. For instance, consider how it fits within a tradition of memoir and autobiography in American literature. Although LaNier tells her own story, how does the book also reveal the stories of others? How does the story extend beyond the personal and enter into the historical and cultural realm? You might also consider how *A Mighty Long Way* ties in with a tradition of American protest literature. How do its thematic concerns tie in with common themes found throughout American or world literature? Like many memoirs, LaNier's tale is also a coming-of-age story. Consider how the development of its young author is revealed. How does Carlotta change from the opening of the story to its conclusion? What does she learn and what do her lessons hold for students?

Students of **social studies, history, or political science** might wish to consider LaNier's tale from a cultural perspective. Consider the contrast between the picture of racism in the American South versus the very different reaction that the Little Rock Nine's actions incite in places like Chicago and New York. Is racism presented as an issue of the past? Or is our quest for understanding, tolerance, and equality ongoing? Does the work suggest what causes racism or how it might be dispelled? Although much has changed since the 1950s and the desegregation of American schools, encourage your students to consider what we can learn from LaNier's story today. What intolerance or injustices still exist? What, if anything, can be done about this? Although *A Mighty Long Way* focuses primarily on racial tensions, consider how it can lead us to a greater exploration of broader issues of civil rights, equality, and tolerance. You may wish to utilize the list of terms and key figures to create a clear picture of this period for your students. Who are some of the important figures LaNier mentions? What impact did they have on American culture? The book presents the opportunity to discuss countless landmark events in history including the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, desegregation, and the Montgomery Movement. LaNier's recollection of Governor Faubus's and President Dwight D. Eisenhower's actions provides political science students with other interesting topics for consideration: namely, the roles of state and federal government or the employment of military force in domestic matters.

Those interested in teaching the text from a **sociological** standpoint might wish to consider how the various groups of people in the story relate to and identify with one another, or how they fail to do so. How do the members of the different races interact? Is their interaction consistent or not? How does their failure to truly interact determine their relationships? Does geography seem to play a part in how the people in LaNier's story relate to one another? Are we able to form judgments about races as a single entity? Consider also how gender is treated in the story. How do Carlotta's experiences vary from the boys' experiences? Does one sex receive harsher treatment than the other? If so, why? What part does sexuality play in the complications presented in the book? How well do the people in the book know each other? What link can one find between understanding and tolerance? *A Mighty Long Way* presents a unique look not only at the power of the individual, but at the immense power of community, both positive (for instance, in how families and neighbors come together to raise and support their children) and negative (in its depictions of extremism and mob violence, for example).

## • discussion and writing

1. Consider the genre or genres of the book. *A Mighty Long Way* is a memoir, but it is also a coming-of-age story and a historical work as well. How can we identify the book as belonging to each of these genres? How do these various genres compliment each other? Or does the book stand out as belonging more to one genre than another?
2. What are some of the major themes addressed in *A Mighty Long Way*? Where else do we find these themes in literature? Are these themes still relevant today? Explain why or why not.
3. In the Prologue, LaNier says that the purpose of her book is “to show that determination, fortitude, and the ability to move the world aren’t reserved for the ‘special’ people.” What does she mean by this and where do we see examples of this in the book? Consider not only the obvious example of LaNier’s effect on society through her will to graduate from Central High School, but other examples as well.
4. LaNier demonstrates the significance of baseball to her and other members of her community. Why might this sport have had such great significance for LaNier and her family and friends? What changes were occurring in professional baseball at the time, and why were these changes so meaningful to the fans? And how did playing baseball or softball present opportunities not otherwise possible?
5. What role did the media play in shaping our view of events such as desegregation? Did the media present an accurate view of what was occurring? Does the book suggest that LaNier believes that the media had a positive effect or a negative one? Do you agree with her? How has the role and impact of the media changed (or stayed the same) today? Discuss.
6. LaNier provides many examples of justice and injustice throughout the book. Does she present the idea that one prevails over the other? How might justice be defined? How do the characters react to injustices, and what is the outcome?
7. Throughout the book, LaNier references countless people who influenced her as a young woman. Who were some of these people and what effects did they have on LaNier?
8. As LaNier speaks throughout the book about the people whom she has encountered in her life, she provides great detail about their backgrounds, their education, and their occupations, often highlighting their accomplishments, or recounting difficult events the people may have struggled through. Why do you think she provides readers with this level of detail about each person? Does it affect our understanding and perception of these people? How does this tie in with the greater themes of the book? What part does understanding or getting to know someone well play in matters of respect and tolerance, for instance?
9. Why do you believe that some of LaNier’s family members, like Big Daddy and Uncle Freddie’s parents, might have chosen not to discuss race or heritage? LaNier’s book comes to a close with the notion of finding one’s voice. How important is it to discuss our background, our experience, our heritage? What impact might our stories have on others?
10. What were some of the sacrifices made by LaNier, the other members of the Little Rock Nine, and their families? Do you feel that these sacrifices were worthwhile? Why or why not?

## • beyond the book: suggested activities

1. Discuss an event that you consider to have been a critical part of your growth and development, or an act which required courage. How did this event help to define who you are? How did it change you? Did your actions have an impact on others as well? Explain.
2. Carlotta Walls LaNier devotes a significant portion of the book to the details of her family and their background. Consider your own family history and investigate your heritage. Create a family tree. What can you learn about yourself through knowledge of your ancestors? Compare your family tree; what do you share in common with the families of other students?
3. Although LaNier's book is a memoir, she is also able to tell the stories of others through her own reflections. Write about an important experience in your own life as if it were an excerpt from your memoir. Then write about the same experience from someone else's point-of-view. Discuss the effect that the two vantage points have on readers. What advantages does each of these narrative styles have?
4. Consider who has had a significant influence on your own life. This may be a family member or a public figure, or both. Explain how they influenced you and what effect this had on you. How does their influence demonstrate the power of a single individual?

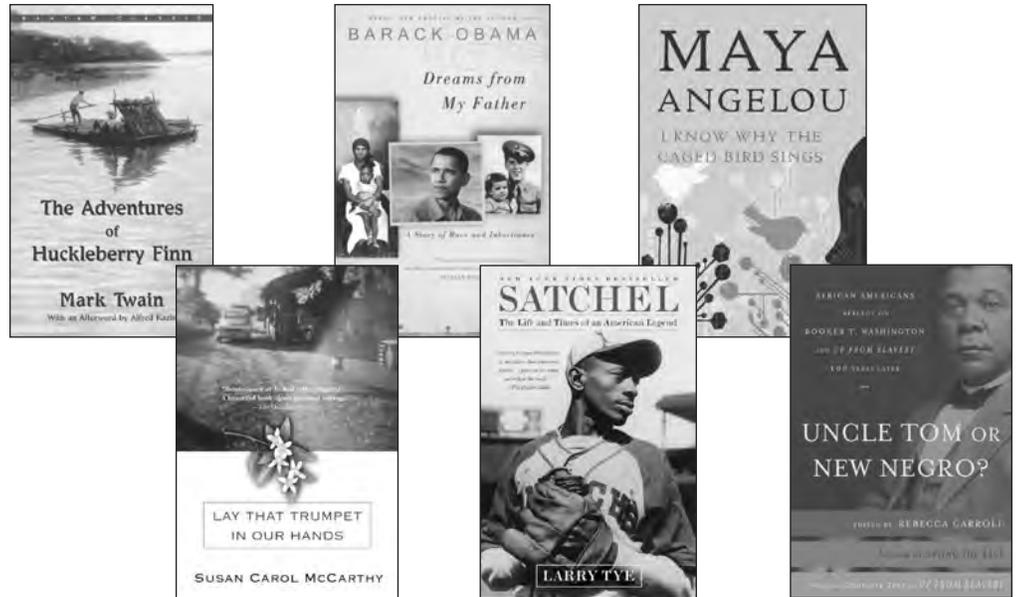
## • topics for further discussion

While *A Mighty Long Way* tells Carlotta's own story, readers will find in the book references to a large number of important historical events and key figures which can be discussed in an effort to open up dialogue to a broader set of topics and themes.

|   |                               |
|---|-------------------------------|
| Blossom Plan, The   | Little Rock Nine              |
| Branton, Wiley  | Marshall, Thurgood            |
| <i>Brown vs. Board of Education</i>   | Mays, Willie                  |
| Civil Rights  | Montgomery Movement, The      |
| Clark, Drs. Kenneth and Mamie   | NAACP                         |
| Curie, Madame   | Parks, Rosa                   |
| Dunbar, Jr., Paul Laurence  | Racism                        |
| Education   | Robinson, Jackie              |
| Entertainers: Count Basie, Nat King Cole,<br>Billy Eckstine, Lena Horne,<br>Thelonious Monk | Rockefeller, John D.          |
| Equality  | Rosenwald, Julius             |
| Freedom   | Segregation and Desegregation |
| Harlem Renaissance, The   | Social Justice                |
| Jim Crow  | Stephens, Charlotte           |
| King, Jr., Dr. Martin Luther  | Till, Emmett                  |
|   | Washington, Booker T.         |

## • other titles of interest

The following list contains suggested works which can be studied alongside *A Mighty Long Way*. Included are works which share similarities in formal characteristics such as genre or theme, as well as some works which share a similar historical and cultural significance.



*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain

*The Catcher and the Rye*, J. D. Salinger

*The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*

*The Color Purple*, Alice Walker

*Dreams from My Father*, Barack Obama

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs

*Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison

*Lay That Trumpet in Our Hands*, Susan Carol McCarthy

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Frederick Douglass

*Satchel*, Larry Tye

*A Separate Peace*, John Knowles

*Thurgood Marshall*, Juan Williams

*A Time to Kill*, John Grisham

*To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee

*Uncle Tom or New Negro?*, Rebecca Carroll

*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe

*The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion

## • about this guide's writer

This guide was produced by **Jennifer Banach**, a writer from Connecticut. Banach has written on a wide range of topics ranging from Romanticism to contemporary literature for publishers including Random House, EBSCO, and Oxford University Press. She served as the Contributing Editor for *Bloom's Guides: The Glass Menagerie* and *Bloom's Guides: Heart of Darkness*, edited by Harold Bloom for Facts on File, Inc., and is the author of *How to Write about Tennessee Williams*. Currently, Banach is at work on *How to Write about Arthur Miller* and *How to Write about Kurt Vonnegut*, also edited by Harold Bloom for Facts on File, Inc., and *Understanding Norman Mailer* for the University of South Carolina Press.