

The Story of Albert Jackson Toronto's First African Canadian Postal Worker

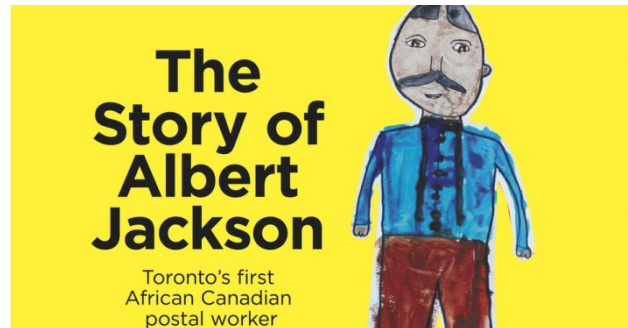
Pamela Jamieson's Grade One Class and Gini Dickie

with Art Direction by Mimi Beyer

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Children's literature can become a tool for social justice and an entry point into tough conversations about unfairness, discrimination, representation and equity. This is what a picture book written and illustrated by a Grade 1 class at Clinton Street Public School, in the Toronto District School Board, successfully does. The



picture book tells the story of Albert Jackson, Canada's first African Canadian postal worker, through words, archival photos, newspaper clippings, maps and beautiful watercolour illustrations by the students. All of this makes it an interesting and comprehensive story to read for children and adults alike!

This picture book's journey began in 2013, when Clinton Street Public School was celebrating its 125th year anniversary. One of the prominent themes for the celebration was to look at the "history of social justice in the community." Pamela Jamieson's Grade 1 class worked collaboratively with the teacher-librarian at the school, Gini Dickie, to create a display about Albert Jackson. Through a variety of activities, the students learned about the "differences between needs and wants, rights and responsibilities and creating an understanding of racial discrimination." They listened to an oral version of Albert Jackson's story and identified the racism he faced. The students also looked at a poster featuring a photo of Albert Jackson shared by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers who were commemorating him. Students then engaged in "shared writing" and worked with artist Mimi Beyer to create the lively illustrations that accompany the text. The story and illustrations were on display at the Clinton Street Public School's anniversary celebration.

The Story of Albert Jackson: Toronto's First African Canadian Postal Worker is based on the real life of Albert Jackson who was Toronto's first Black postal worker. Albert Jackson started his job at the post office in 1882, but because of the discrimination he faced, due to his skin colour, his colleagues refused to train him. Upset and frustrated with the way Albert Jackson was being treated, the Black community came together to protest the unfairness. The community activism involved writing letters to the newspaper and holding protests. Since an election was around the corner, Prime Minister John A. MacDonald heard their voices because he wanted votes from the Black community. Albert Jackson got his training and went on to work as a postal worker for 36 years!

As an elementary school teacher committed to social justice education and a graduate student researching representation in children's literature, I believe that this book is a great resource for the classroom. This book has a lot of potential for the classroom because it disrupts and moves beyond the "single story" of the Underground Railroad and slavery associated with the Black community. Albert Jackson in this picture book is depicted as a complete and complex character: he went to school, got a job, married, had children and owned a home. This set of events changes the stereotypical and limited narrative that often depicts Black people as always being "on the run" and not settling. Being enslaved and fleeing with his family is just part of Albert Jackson's story, but it's not the whole story. It matters that the story starts with "Albert Jackson was a postal worker" because this positioning illustrates that he was an important pioneer who contributed to the building of Toronto. For too long, schools have only focused on Black histories during a specific time in the school year — namely Black History Month. But this book offers a different story and gives teachers the opportunity to make their curriculum inclusive to represent the many identities in their classroom during the entire school year.

This book can also become an entry point into having age appropriate, yet critical conversations about issues of social justice with students. Students in Grade 1 can now discuss the meaning of discrimination, racism, respect, fairness, dignity and election through an interesting story. Through storytelling, students learn about the history around them and become socially conscious members of society. This book teaches students the language of social justice and offers them tangible strategies to use if they see something unfair happening in their classrooms or communities. It creates a space to have these conversations and also leaves room for further inquiry.

Teachers can also use this book as a resource to carry out the curriculum. It is not a book that has to be read *just* during Black History Month, but rather we can widen the scope and connect it to other parts of the curriculum. One way Kindergarten teachers can bring this story into their classrooms is through a writing or post office centre in their play-based classrooms. Primary

grade teachers can use the social studies curriculum to carry out lessons on this book. In Grade 1, students can learn about Albert Jackson as they explore the services and occupations in their local communities. In Grade 2, students can connect this story to the curriculum strand on families; and in Grade 3, students can connect to the study of early settlers and pioneers.

The books we bring into the classroom are important because through them students can learn about the world and their roles within it. As teachers, we need to choose books that help our students think critically and inspire engaging conversations. We can ensure that the books we choose offer multiple perspectives and show people being authentic and dynamic. This is a powerful book for classroom use!



Rabia Khokhar