

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for All Over but the Shoutin' by Rick Bragg

Book Information

Rick Bragg, All Over but the Shoutin'

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Book Level: 6.4

Interest Level: UG

The author recalls his poverty-stricken youth in Alabama in the 1960s and 70s, focusing on the efforts of his mother to protect her sons from the violence of their father, and telling of the sacrifices she made so her children could have a better life.

Award: ABBY Children's Award/Honor Book

Topics: Biographies/Autobiographies,
Biographies/Autobiographies (All);
Character Traits, Self Improvement;
Community Life, Poverty; Family Life,
Mothers; Recommended Reading,
California Recommended Lit., English,
9-12; Recommended Reading, NY Times
Editor's Choice

Main Characters

Ava Bundrum (Miss Abigail or Miss Ab) Rick's grandmother; she always welcomed his mother and her boys home after bad episodes with his father

Charles Bragg (Daddy) Rick's father, who is haunted by images from the Korean War; a hard drinking man, he is mean and irresponsible towards his family

Charlie Bundrum Margaret's sweet-natured, hardworking father

James, Bill, Edna, Emma Mae, Gracie Juanita, Jo, and Sue Margaret's siblings

Margaret Bragg (Momma) Rick's mother, who works tirelessly to give her boys a better chance at life

Mark Bragg Rick's younger brother, who is in and out of penitentiaries and finds solace in drinking

Rick Bragg the author and narrator of this memoir; he escapes his impoverished past and goes on to win the Pulitzer Prize as a reporter for the <I>New York Times</I>

Sam Bragg a mill worker, husband, and father; Rick's responsible older brother, who protected him from their father

Uncle John and Uncle Ed the spouses of Jo and Juanita, who nurture Sam, Rick, and Mark as they grow up

Vocabulary

ablution the liquid used for cleansing; the water that indoor plumbing brings

arugula the leaves of a Mediterranean plant sometimes used in salads

avarice greed, a desire for wealth

chert a variety of siliceous rock containing quartz

erudite learned, scholarly

feted honored, treated to a celebration

rickets a disease that affects bone growth, especially in children, caused by deficiencies in vitamin D, calcium, and exposure to sunlight

Synopsis

Rick Bragg's parents grew up poor in the Appalachian foothills near the Alabama-Georgia border. It was a place where men did hard labor and women worked their hands to the bone. Rick's mother, Margaret, raises her three sons, Sam, Rick, and Mark mostly by herself. Charles Bragg, her husband, is haunted by the memories of the Korean War and comes and goes from their lives while the boys are little. During his periods of sobriety, he tries as best he can to be a father, but his dark episodes overcome him. He often becomes drunk and mean and eventually leaves for good. Margaret is pregnant with her fourth child the last time he leaves. The child dies at birth. Margaret always goes home to her family when the money runs out, and she and her boys live in her parents' small house.

Rick eventually reaches a peace with his father when he is sixteen and his father is close to death. His father gives him a rifle and some books that

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become treasured possessions. Daddy Bragg also reveals an atrocity he committed in the war. Rick believes the war changed his father, that he came home to his sweetheart to heal, but some part of him could not be fixed.

Momma and her sons live on welfare and the generosity of her family. She picks cotton in the fields and takes in ironing to earn a little more money so she can give her sons a better chance in life. She wears used clothing so the boys can have better clothes, and she stays home from all school and sport activities so her boys will not be ashamed of her. She is a woman of undying faith. At school the Bragg boys are labeled as poor by the teachers and, consequently, are kept out of more advanced learning groups, but Rick loves reading from an early age. When he is old enough to date, many girls shun Rick when they find out about his background of poverty. He works construction with his uncle Ed to earn money for a car. Luck seems to follow Rick when he survives a terrible car accident.

During high school Rick takes a journalism class because it is supposed to be easy. The class gets him involved with the school newspaper, where he works as sports editor. After high school, Rick signs up for a writing class at the local university and again volunteers for the school paper. As luck would have it, a person in the school paper's office gives Rick's name to the *Jacksonville News* when they are looking for a sports reporter. Rick's career as a reporter has begun. Although he receives no more formal education, he moves on to bigger and more respected papers, such as the *Anniston Star* and the *Birmingham News*. He moves from sports writing to being a state reporter. His love of work and fear of fathering a child brings an end to his young marriage; he and his wife divorce amicably.

At each new workplace he finds someone who respects his work ethic and writing abilities and is willing to overlook his lack of formal education and poverty-ridden upbringing. Rick, however, lacks confidence in himself and straddles the line of envy and hate for those reporters from privileged backgrounds. One way this lack of confidence

shows is in his promise to get his mother her own home. He begins to save for it but refuses to buy on credit. He does not want to risk being unemployed and have his mother lose the house if he cannot make the payments.

From Birmingham, Rick returns for a brief time to the *Anniston Star* to be close to his mother when she goes through a rough time with Mark. He next moves on to the *St. Petersburg Times* and covers the Miami beat. Rick learns a lot in the Miami office and gains experience in foreign correspondence by doing a story about Operation Desert Storm. He learns the meaning of real misery, poverty, and cruelty in Haiti, and covers a riot in Miami, barely escaping death.

He keeps in touch with home during these years, but lies to Momma about the nature of his assignments. His friends encourage him to apply for the Nieman Fellowship, a nine-month study program for journalists at Harvard University, saying he is the perfect candidate. He is awarded the fellowship and enjoys the learning atmosphere at the school. His feelings of inadequacy diminish a bit after his experience at Harvard, for he now holds some credentials. The curator of the fellowship and Rick's mentor, Bill Kovach, sees his potential and encourages him to set ambitious goals if he wants to advance.

His return to St. Petersburg is short-lived, for he receives a job offer from the *Los Angeles Times* after turning down a simultaneous offer from the *New York Times*. His time in California is brief since the *Los Angeles Times* misrepresents the position he had been asked to fill. Instead he goes to New York. Here, Rick reports on the bodega robberies and other stories that reveal the dark side of New York.

Rick is sent home briefly to write about a tornado that devastated a church in the town where he was born. After six months of reporting, he is again sent to Haiti to cover the American intervention in that country. Rick proves himself, and the *New York Times* makes him a national correspondent

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assigning him to its Southern Bureau in Atlanta.

Rick is thrilled at first to be so close to home. He covers the stories of the Southern working poor. But being so close to home also allows him to see the pain Mark is inflicting on their mother by drinking so much. He asks the *New York Times* for a transfer, but they refuse, saying "the story" is in the South.

He is called from an assignment in New Orleans when his grandmother Abigail dies, and he comforts his mother, who does not attend the funeral. When the Susan Smith story breaks in South Carolina about a young mother's two boys being abducted, Rick is there to cover it. At first he believes her, but as the truth of the mother's culpability is revealed, it shocks and sickens him. He hates it for its hopelessness, yet can understand her wanting something other than the life to which she was born. He understands nothing of the bombing in Oklahoma City that he covers and finds it difficult to reflect upon.

Throughout his career, Rick wins many journalism awards, but he still dreams of his picture hanging on the wall with Pulitzer Prize winners. Once, after a fire at his mother's house, she looked at a charred plaque and told him how proud she was of him and how his success had validated her as a mother. When he wins the Pulitzer, he asks his mother to accompany him to New York for the ceremony. She reluctantly agrees, and there is a whirlwind of preparation. She is amazed by all the "firsts" she experiences -- first suitcase, first airplane ride, first elevator, first room service, first escalator, first skyscrapers. Her real fear is of the people and not fitting in, but she is warmly welcomed.

Soon after the trip to New York, Rick buys his mother her own house. He has finally accumulated enough money to buy a house outright. The second day in the home is tarnished when Mark shows up drunk, and Sam and Mark fight. Ultimately, things settle down, and the pattern of the Braggs' lives continue, only in a nicer place. The resentment that Rick feels towards the world for being born poor has eased.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

What finally causes Rick's "chip on his shoulder the size of a concrete block" to shrink?

There are probably a number of causes. One may be maturity with the lessening of the conflicts that sometimes occurs in adolescence and young adulthood. Another cause may be that as Rick works in the reporting business, he is exposed to people who do not immediately label him as poor, uneducated, and lacking the right credentials -- people who are willing to give him a job for his experience and his abilities. Winning the Pulitzer Prize seems to validate Rick, just as he hopes his memoir will validate his mother. In the end, Rick does not feel like he is ahead of others but feels he has somehow caught up with the rest and is able to give back some of what he has been given.

Literary Analysis

How is the format of a memoir an effective means of relating the story Rick Bragg wishes to tell?

Prompted by his grandmother's death, Rick wishes to write a tribute to his mother to honor her as well as vindicate her. He could have written a standard biography of his life with everything in neat chronological order, but instead he writes the book as if he were a storyteller. This format gives him the freedom to connect seemingly disjointed episodes and links the story of his life with the lives of the people who have crossed his path or influenced him. He is comfortable with this style as it is the style he uses as a reporter. It flows from his heart and mind without the constraints of a rigid formula.

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Inferential Comprehension

How has Rick's self-imposed rule not to drink alone helped him?

Knowing the pain his father's drinking caused the family and witnessing Mark doing the same thing with his life is sobering to Rick. He knows there is a propensity to drink in his family, with his father and maternal grandfather dying young because of it. Rick is like his father in some ways and is drawn to and affected by misery. His rule helps keep him from using alcohol to find solace from loneliness or the memories that flash through his mind. Although he does not seem to seek a long-term committed relationship, the rule allows him to be responsible towards his job and the promise he made to purchase a home for his mother.

Constructing Meaning

Throughout the memoirs, Rick is concerned with social status and the implications of being raised in a poor household. Do you notice any social stratification of the student body in your classroom? What evidence is there of stratification? Is stratification always bad? Is there a way to change the signs of negative stratification? How would you propose to do it?

The students should note any differences they see in ways students are treated merely because they are born to privilege or poverty, are either boys or girls, or are from certain racial or ethnic backgrounds. Stratification may not always be bad. During the developmental years, students are often stratified by age groups in learning or sports situations. Students should share their observations of any stratification they see as negative and state how they think the situation could be made more equitable for all involved.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Unwritten in the pages of this book is the story of the African-American people of the rural South who, at the time of Rick Bragg's youth, live parallel but separate lives from the white people. The

students can familiarize themselves with this situation by researching this period in African-American history, in which the Jim Crow laws were still in effect in the South. They can then make a time line of the historical and political changes from 1950 to the present that have allowed African-Americans to participate more fully in the mainstream of American life.

Describing Actions or Events The job of the reporter is to relate the who, what, where, when, why, and how of an event. Have the students become reporters and cover local events in their town or community. If possible, have them find and uncover the dignity that resides in the people involved or affected by the events covered. The class can then publish their own newspaper, giving it an appropriate title. Students may wish to write editorials or design advertisements to round out the scope of the paper. The paper can be distributed throughout the school or in the wider community.

Understanding Characterization The people in the Bragg family had to learn to work together to do things for themselves. They did not have the financial resources to get things repaired by someone else. As a lesson in self-sufficiency and working as a family unit, have the students bring to school something broken or an ingredient of a recipe. Then working together, have the students fix the broken object or create a dish, using their personal talents as done in the Bragg family. Have the students relate the feelings they experienced while doing this assignment.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning Rick Bragg uses words that are both "colloquial" and beautifully poetic. He is able to give a taste of the stories he is about to relate by the few choice words he selects for each chapter title. The students may enjoy a writing exercise in which they are asked to retitl the chapters. They should be encouraged to use similes, metaphors, or other literary expressions to describe the content of the chapter. Creativity is encouraged. The students can then read their list of chapter titles aloud to the class, explaining any whose meaning may be obscure.