

Spell Freedom Readers' Guide

Questions for Discussion

1. Did reading *Spell Freedom* change your perception or understanding of the Civil Rights Movement in any way? Did any other aspects of the history chronicled in *Spell Freedom* surprise you?
2. The central figures in *Spell Freedom* are a school teacher (Septima Clark), a small businessman (Esau Jenkins), a beautician (Bernice Robinson), and a "radical hillbilly" educator (Myles Horton). They are quite ordinary, middle-aged citizens who put their lives on hold, took great risks, and faced danger to lead their neighbors toward freedom. Do you think you'd be willing to do this for a cause you believed important?
3. Did you have a favorite person in the *Spell Freedom* story?
4. *Spell Freedom* is filled with historical accounts of people--sharecroppers, laborers, teachers, domestic workers -- taking courageous action, willing to risk their lives and livelihoods to regain their right to vote. What does the right to vote mean to you? What would you be willing to do to protect it?
5. *Spell Freedom* chronicles the civil rights movement from various angles, including the powerful opposition it faced, especially the multi-level "massive resistance" of the southern states: from state sovereignty commissions and investigations to White Citizen Councils and the Ku Klux Klan. What was your reaction to these efforts to thwart the struggle for equal rights and punish those advocating for democracy?
6. Do you think many Americans take their right to vote for granted? Do you think citizens of a democracy have a responsibility to vote -- as Septima Clark taught in the Citizenship Schools? Should voting be mandatory, as it is in some other democratic nations?
7. Septima Clark and her Citizenship School colleagues worked for years to cultivate community leaders across the south -- most of them of modest means and education-- empowering them to organize their neighbors in the fight for justice. What are the qualities of a community leader?
8. Dr. King called Mrs Clark "Mother of the Movement" but she has not received the attention given to other movement leaders. Why do you think her legacy has (until now) been neglected. And why do you think the Citizenship Schools program, which played such an important role in building the movement, is not better known?
9. One of the threads in *Spell Freedom* is the role of women as organizers and visionaries in the civil rights movement, and their frustration in the ways they were treated: their work minimized and their opinions ignored. Do you think this situation for women has improved in the past 70 years?
10. *Spell Freedom* charts the role of music in the civil rights movement, and traces the evolution of "We Shall Overcome" from its origins at Highlander and use in the Citizenship Schools to become the anthem of the movement. Why do you think group singing was so important, and what about that song was inspirational?
11. The citizenship schools transformed lives by teaching poor and unlettered people how to read and write in order to register to vote. But the classes also taught them about their constitutional rights, what democracy means, and how government works. Could a modern version of citizenship schools be useful today?
12. Do you think there is a role for civic education -- in schools, colleges, and in community settings today?