

***Don't Say Ain't* Web Discussion Guide**

Don't Say Ain't

by Irene Smalls

Illustrated by Colin Bootman

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“Engaging, richly hued oil illustrations effectively capture the characters and setting. . . . New York City schools were first integrated in 1957, and Smalls portrays the advantages open to a select group of students with subtlety. This perceptive and useful title can be used to generate discussion on a variety of issues.”

—*School Library Journal*

Before you read, set the scene.

Don't Say Ain't takes place in Harlem, which is a part of New York City.

Can you find Harlem on a map?

What can you tell about Harlem from the illustrations in *Don't Say Ain't*?

Don't Say Ain't is set in 1957. Look at the cars and dresses. Are they different from the cars and clothing of today? Something else was different in the early 1950s. If you went into a school you might see only black students in one school and only white students in another.

Before 1954, schools in America were segregated.

Almost fifty years ago, the Supreme Court of the United States handed down a landmark decision.

The Court said that schools that were separate were really not equal and that children should not be prevented from going to a school because of race.

Background on Brown v. Board of Education

May 2004 is the 50th anniversary of the desegregation of American schools.

“Brown” was the last name of Linda Brown, a young black child from Topeka, Kansas.

In the early 1950s, when Linda Brown was in the third grade, she had to walk one mile through a railroad switchyard to get to her black elementary school, even though a white elementary school was only seven blocks away.

Linda's father tried to enroll her in the white school which was much closer to her home but the Board of Education refused.

A group of people thought this was unfair and sued. Other people argued that schools could be "separate but equal". The Kansas court ruled in favor of the Board of Education and against Linda. The case was appealed to the highest court in America—the Supreme Court.

On May 17, 1954 Chief Justice Earl Warren read the decision of the unanimous Court in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

"We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe it does . . . We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.

This ruling required the desegregation of schools in the United States.

In *Don't Say Ain't*, Dana now had the chance to go to an integrated school with higher academic standards. And that made all the difference.

- To learn more about segregation read *When Marian Sang* by Pam Muñoz Ryan.

For more information on Harlem:

- Read *Irene and the Big Fine Nickel* also by Irene Smalls and set in Harlem. To learn more about Irene and her books go to the web at <http://members.aol.com/ISmalls107/>
- Read *Rap A Tap Tap Tap: Here's Bojangles—Think of That!* by Leo and Diane Dillon
- Read *Perfect Harmony: A Musical Journey with the Boys Choir of Harlem* by Charles R. Smith

Double-Dutch

Don't Say Ain't begins with three friends chanting a rhyme and jumping rope. Jumping in between two ropes is called Double Dutch. Dana and her friends probably used old clotheslines for jump ropes. Can you jump to the *Don't Say Ain't* rhyme?

Why do think jumping rope was a popular activity for children in a city?

Do you know any jump rope rhymes? Can you make up rhymes?

Double Dutch is now a team sport with national competitions. Fusion Double Dutch adds music and acrobatics to the sport.

Nine million children between 6 to 19 years old are over-weight according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Schools can help by encouraging activities like jumping rope. Double-Dutch is fast, fun, good for the heart and fights obesity.

For more information:

- Search for Double Dutch on the web.
- Read *Double Dutch: A Celebration of Jump Rope, Rhyme, and Sisterhood* by Veronica Chambers

Language, talking, and choosing what to say.

Dana's godmother says "Don't say ain't, children. People judge you on how you speaks!"

What do you think she means?

Can you think of other ways, besides speaking, that you might use to judge people?

Dana's teacher, Mrs. Middleton, asks Dana not to say "ain't" but then she says it herself, "Honeychile, I ain't gonna eat more than one piece of your famous peach cobbler."

Dana tells her friends that "My teacher talks strange at school, but then she talks like real people here!"

Dana's teacher knows how to use English in two different ways. How does she know when to use each one?

Have you ever tried to use special language that identified you as a part of a group—or that other people couldn't understand so they knew they were outside the group?

Many people in the world speak several languages. Do you know children who speak a language other than English at home? What would it be like to have a choice of languages to use? What does bilingual mean? Can you use the web to discover how many people in the United States speak Spanish? Have you seen signs in languages other than English?

Language changes as people use it. Can you think of any books written in dialect? Some authors choose to write some of their work in dialect. Listen to some of the poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar and talk about the choices he made.

- Read *Flossie and the Fox* by Pat McKissack. Does it sound as though someone is telling you a story? Now "translate" the story into standard English. What does "voice" mean in writing?

Being Different and Being Liked

What did Dana wear on her first day at her new school? What did the other girls wear to school?

Did Dana try to be friendly on the playground? What did she say? What did the other girl say? How did Dana feel?

Look at the picture on the back cover of the book. Can you tell how Dana feels?

Why wouldn't Dana's old friends play with her anymore?

Self-Esteem: Going Too Far to Fall Back

When Dana receives the highest grade on the city test, her godmother says, “You gone too far to fall back.”

What do you think she means?

Did Dana want to go to the new advanced school?

Do you think it was hard for her to keep going when the other children were unfriendly to her?

Author Irene Smalls based *Don't Say Ain't* on her own experiences. When she grew up she went to college and then went on to graduate school. She has traveled widely, met lots of people and kept her old friends. She has even been to the White House to tell stories.

What do you think?

What would her life have been like if she had not had a Godmother to encourage her?

What would her life have been like if she had not gone to the advanced school?

What would her life have been like if she had given up?

About the author: IRENE SMALLS grew up in Harlem and Double Dutch was her favorite game. In *Don't Say Ain't* she uses the images of the two ropes spinning as a metaphor. Dana has to integrate the two important parts of her life just as a jumper has to smoothly enter the space between the two moving ropes in Double Dutch.

Irene Smalls graduated from Cornell University with a B.A. in Black Studies and from New York University with an M.B.A. She is the author of 15 books for children, including *Kevin and His Dad* (Little, Brown), and three storytelling CDs. Also an historian, Ms. Smalls teaches about the history of the Johnkankus, a 200-year-old Black Christmas celebration. Irene Smalls performs and lectures at schools and conferences around the country. She currently lives in Boston, Massachusetts.

About the illustrator: Colin Bootman was born in Trinidad and moved to the United States when he was seven. Colin felt a special connection to this story because, like Dana, he too struggled with “proper” speech as a child. His Trinidadian accent was often difficult for others to understand, and he tried very hard to sound “American.” Colin studied art at LaGuardia High School for the Arts and at the School of Visual Arts. He has illustrated many books for children and lives in New York City.