



YA/Adult Study Guide for A Graphic Biography of Paul Robeson

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Introduction: Paul Leroy Robeson, fondly known as “Princeton’s Native Son” in the Witherspoon-Jackson neighborhood where he was born, is an icon in excellence. As a global citizen, Mr. Robeson impacted the world in arts, sports, politics and social justice. Born in the shadows of chattel slavery in the United States, Paul Robeson was a product of family dreams, the tumultuous times in which he lived and an upstander of his own imagination.

With every panel, Rudahl’s graphic biography provides insight into Paul Robeson’s life using a condensed style of comic drawing that allows the reader to gain perspective on Mr. Robeson’s legacy as a 20th century friend and citizen of the world. Robeson was an advocate for the poor, the working class and the cultural elite. In Chapter 1, the graphic novel briefly chronicles the life of his father, Reverend William Drew Robeson, and mother Maria Bustill Robeson before devoting the remaining pages to the triumphs and trials of Mr. Robeson over the course of his lifetime (April 9, 1898 - January 23, 1976).

This study guide provides references to be used as a source for extended learning. The political landscape, as well as some of the principles, people and places explored in each chapter, are listed as a resource for personal study. A guiding quote from the chapter anchors each list. Readers may choose to use the guide to explore all or some of the topics related to Robeson’s life and/or the various influences on Robeson described in the text based on personal interest.

Each chapter is like a song verse or stanza that tells the whole story of Paul Robeson’s strength, humanity, courage and resolve...

Focus Questions for each chapter: *Triple read of influence, contemporaries and anti-oppression ideals*

1. Who/what were the influencing forces acting on Paul Robeson?
2. What social or political alternatives did Robeson have to the positions he took?
3. How does history shape Mr. Robeson’s choices?
4. Which characteristic (strength, courage or resolve) was the more important value for Paul to have at this point of the story? Why?

Chapters

1. Son of a slave, star of Rutgers, pp. 1 - 26
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Youtube [Playlist](#) of songs referenced in the book

Chapter 1 | Son of a slave, star of Rutgers

"Equality might be denied, but I knew I was not inferior..." (p. 15).

Robeson Family:

- William Drew Robeson
- Maria Louisa Bustill Robeson
- Benjamin Robeson
- Marian Robeson Forsythe
- William Robeson, Jr.
- Reeve Robeson

Ida B. Wells

President McKinley

Toussaint L'Ouverture

Black Social Circles/Collegiate "Secret" Societies

Sororities and Fraternities (mentioned in the text indicated by *)

- Alpha Phi Alpha*
- Alpha Kappa Alpha
- Kappa Alpha Psi
- Omega Psi Phi
- Delta Sigma Theta*
- Phi Beta Sigma
- Zeta Phi Beta
- Sigma Gamma Rho
- Iota Phi Theta
- Phi Beta Kappa*

The [Black] Press

- New York Sun
- New York World
- New York Tribune
- Philadelphia Tribune
- The Messenger

Additional resources:

The Black Press Archives [Archives & Online Resources](#)

Rutgers Scarlet and Black Project <https://www.scarletandblackproject.com/archive/>

Chapter 2 | First Steps on the Stage

“He felt the burden of racism lighten perhaps only because class prejudice was so strong” (p. 44).

Eubie Blake
W.E.B. DuBois
Thurgood Marshall
Adam Clayton Powell
Jim Thorpe
Eslanda Cardozo Goode
John Payne
Lawrence Benjamin Brown
Roland Hayes
The American Professional Football Association (Akron Pros/Milwaukee Badgers)
The Great Migration
The Harlem YMCA

Additional resource:

History of Minstrelsy <http://exhibits.lib.usf.edu/exhibits/show/minstrelsy>

Chapter 3 | He finds his voice

“As long as working people could be divided by fear and hatred, blinded to their true enemies, the gang bosses would feast in peace on the lives of the poor” (p. 66).

Eugene O'Neill
Charles Gilpin
Oscar Micheaux
Fisk Jubilee Singers
Jack Johnson
Langston Hughes
Zora Neal Hurston
Carl Van Vechten
Ira Aldridge
Jomo Kenyatta
Kwame Nkrumah
Cyril Lionel Robert (C.L.R.) James
Harlem Renaissance
Welsh Miners Demonstration
Pan Africanism

Additional resources:

“How Paul Robeson found his voice in the Welsh valleys”

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jul/02/how-paul-robeson-found-political-voice-in-welsh-valleys>

Chapter 4 | A World to Win

“The battlefield is everywhere. The artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice.” (p. 90)

Alexander Pushkin

Oliver Law

Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein

Mei Lan Fang

Jawaharlal Nehru

Spanish Civil War

Basque Children's Committee

Additional resources:

Robeson tomatoes <https://www.rareseeds.com/store/vegetables/purple/paul-robeson-tomato>

Caste: Origins of our discontent by Isabel Wilkerson--perspective on race in the United States

<https://www.npr.org/2020/08/10/900274938/caste-argues-its-most-violent-manifestation-is-in-treatment-of-black-americans>

Ballad for Americans <https://www.radiodiaries.org/ballad-for-americans/>

Influence of the Communist Party on FDR-era aesthetics

<https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2011/mayjune/feature/land-our-land>

Chapter 5 | Bloodied but Unbowed

“In a socialist country I charge nothing. In a capitalist country, I charge as much as I can” (p. 116).

Statement on ____-isms that frame the “**ballad of an American**” named Paul Robeson

This graphic novel unfolds the many layers of Mr. Robeson’s story that have been heard and known as well as those that have not. Here is a list of complex ideas and ideologies (-isms) discussed in the text:

- Racism,
- Ableism,
- Sexism in the form of machismo,
- Capitalism,
- Classism/elitism,
- Colonialism,
- Nationalism,
- Nativism,
- Populism,
- Ethnocentrism,
- Militarism
- Socialism,
- Fascism and
- Communism

We made a deliberate choice not to feature these storylines prominently in this guide to the book but want to acknowledge that because of their interplay, Mr. Robeson suffered needlessly at the end of his career and life. Black people, especially Black men, and contemporaries of Paul Robeson suffered under the weight of these -isms. Many died prematurely because of race-related oppression. It is commonly known and accepted that the bodies and minds of Black men, especially former athletes, though strong, are rendered weak under these weights. We hope personal study done as a result of reading Chapter 5 will inspire readers to imagine the connections between the oppressive forces of -isms on individuals and collective communities, healthcare, state violence against them and the dangerous toll taken on their families.

Because fascism is featured prominently in the last chapter of this guide, we invite readers to also explore exactly what the antifa (antifascist) movement of our current socio-political climate is on your own. No specific recommendations for exploring this concept are provided intentionally.

Additional resources:

Chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE): What could Najeh Davenport learn from Robeson?

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/25/sports/football/nfl-concussion-racial-bias.html>

How to resolve racially stressful situations (Ted Talk by Howard Stevenson)

https://www.ted.com/talks/howard_c_stevenson_how_to_resolve_racially_stressful_situations?referrer=playlist-itunes_podcasts_new_politics

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