

TEACHER'S GUIDE for

BRAVE BALLERINA: The Story of Janet Collins

Written by Michelle Meadows, Illustrated by Ebony Glenn
Published by Henry Holt/Macmillan
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A Junior Library Guild Selection

ABOUT THE BOOK

BRAVE BALLERINA is a picture book biography of Janet Collins, the first black prima ballerina with the Metropolitan Opera House. Janet wanted to be a ballerina in the 1930s and 40s, a time when racial segregation was widespread in the United States. Despite discrimination, Janet pursued dance with a passion. This is the story of a remarkable pioneer.

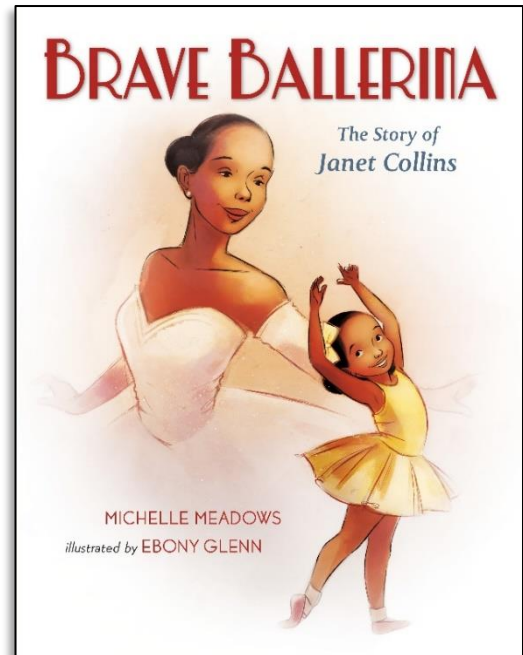
STARRED REVIEW

★ **From *School Library Journal*:**

"Young dancers will find inspiration in the first picture book biography written about groundbreaking dancer Janet Collins....Collins's story is told masterfully, with additional background information in an author's note. This book radiates with the joy of dance. A first purchase for most collections."

KEY THEMES

- Picture Book Biography, Nonfiction
- Dance, Music, Performing Arts
- Women's History
- Black History
- Discrimination, Bravery, Perseverance
- Diversity, Multiculturalism



OBSERVATION MONTHS & DAYS

February: Black History Month **March:** Women's History Month

April: National Poetry Month **April 29:** International Dance Day

Last Saturday in July: National Dance Day **First week of October:** World Ballet Day

PRE-READING DISCUSSION: Racial segregation in history

- Janet Collins grew up at a time in history (1930s and 40s) when racial segregation (the separation of racial groups) was widespread in the United States. White people and black people were not allowed to attend the same schools, eat in the same restaurants, drink from the same water fountains, or use the same bathrooms. People were restricted to institutions and facilities based on race.
- This also meant that at that time, some ballet schools would not admit black students, and black dancers and white dancers were not allowed to dance on the same stage together.
- **This is racial discrimination, which is wrong, unjust, and against the law.** Through the Civil Rights Movement (mainly during the 1950s and 60s), black people and white people joined together to stand up against discrimination – and to demand **equality, justice, and inclusion** for black people.
- When Janet Collins could not get into ballet schools because of discrimination, she sought lessons with a private teacher and kept on dancing.
- As a teenager, Janet danced beautifully at an audition. The director recognized her talent. But because the ballet company toured the country during a time of segregation, Janet was told that the only way she could perform on stage with the other dancers was to lighten her skin for performances. Janet said no; she did not lighten her skin. She walked away, cried...but kept on dancing.
- BRAVE BALLERINA tells the story of a woman who worked hard and followed her dreams of becoming a ballerina.
- **Today, we are proud to have a society that values diversity and the inclusion of all people.**

DEFINITIONS

- **Discrimination:** Unfair or unequal treatment—treating some groups of people less fairly than others
- **Racial discrimination:** Discrimination against groups of people based on race
- **Equality:** The rights of different groups of people to have the same treatment
- **Inclusion:** The act of respecting and including all people
- **Diversity:** The vast, vibrant differences that make each person unique, including but not limited to race, religion, gender, age, nationality

AFTER READING: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you know that Janet Collins loved to dance? Which parts of the story show her love of dance?
2. What did Janet Collins do to achieve her dreams of becoming a ballerina?
3. What did Janet's mother do to pay for her dance lessons? Why do you think her mother did this?
4. What challenges did Janet Collins face in her life?
5. Why do you think Janet Collins kept dancing despite the challenges?
6. How would you feel if you were not allowed to pursue your dreams?
7. How does the rhythm and rhyme of the text express themes of the book?
8. What did you find most surprising about this story?
9. Which scene in this book is your favorite? Why?
10. Why do you think Janet Collins decided not to lighten her skin?

11. Why do you think the title of this book is BRAVE BALLERINA? What does it mean to be brave? How did Janet Collins display bravery?
12. What other words would you use to describe Janet Collins?
13. How can learning about the lives of other people help you?

FROM THE AUTHOR'S NOTE

1. When was Janet Collins born?
2. When did Janet Collins die?
3. Who was Carmelita Maracci? [teacher in scene: "This is the class, a welcoming place..."]
4. Who was Zachary Solov? [man in scene: "This is the man who saw her perform..."]
5. Why did the author, Michelle Meadows, write BRAVE BALLERINA?

ACTIVITIES

- **BRAVERY IS... Poster and/or Paper:** Define "bravery" and find as many synonyms as you can. Then identify 1-3 brave people, whether current or in history. Write about why you think each person is brave and add pictures.
- **DIVERSITY IN DANCE:** Research and write about an aspect of diversity in dance. This could include researching a topic, a type of dance, a person, an organization, an event, or other activity. Write about what you learn and what you find interesting.
- **SUPPORTERS:** Janet Collins had many supporters throughout her life. Some of them are named in the Author's Note. Pick one of the names and research the person's life. Write about what you learn and what you find interesting.
- **BRAVE ARTISTS IN HISTORY:** How much art would not exist if courageous people had not pushed past the boundaries of discrimination (whether based on race, nationality, gender, religion, or other areas)? Research the history of other important artists who faced discrimination and persisted. Artists include dancers, musicians, actors, and other performers, as well as painters, writers, and others who create with great talent and skill. Write about the artist's experiences, how the person overcame challenges, and why you admire him or her.