

# Crossing the Curriculum

## Language Arts

Pretext you are a journalist in 1968 Chicago. Write an article about the events surrounding Bucky's trial. Include facts about his arrest, the demonstration, and his release.

At the end of the book, Sam tells Leroy that he's going home. Try to imagine what might have happened when he got there. Write a short scene between Sam and Father that might have taken place that night.

## Social Studies

Read the author's note at the end of the book. Write an essay comparing and contrasting the goals and activities of the civil rights movement with those of The Black Panther Party. Write about the different kinds of community organizing that occurred. How did the Black Panthers work in the community? How did the civil rights movement motivate people to act? You may also wish to discuss how community organizing is relevant today.

## Essay Topics

How are family dynamics portrayed in the novel? How are the families—Sam's, Maxie's, and/or Bucky's—different? Compare and contrast Sam and Maxie's family situations. Especially consider Sam's relationship with Stick, Maxie's relationship with Raheem, and the role of parents in each of their lives.

Identify the most important roles youth played in the historical civil rights movement, and discuss how those activities and themes are reflected in the novel.

## Additional Activities

Imagine that you and Sam (or Maxie) are pen pals. Write a letter to him describing how the world has changed since 1968. How might Sam explain what was going on in his own community during the civil rights movement? Write a letter from him to you, too.

Ask students to build a word pyramid to represent either the block tower or the gun, or both, using words/phrases that speak to the story's theme or its impact on them.

## Kekla would love to visit your classroom or school!

She does book presentations and writing workshops. For scheduling and information, contact:

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## *The Rock and the River*

by Kekla Magoon

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## About the Author



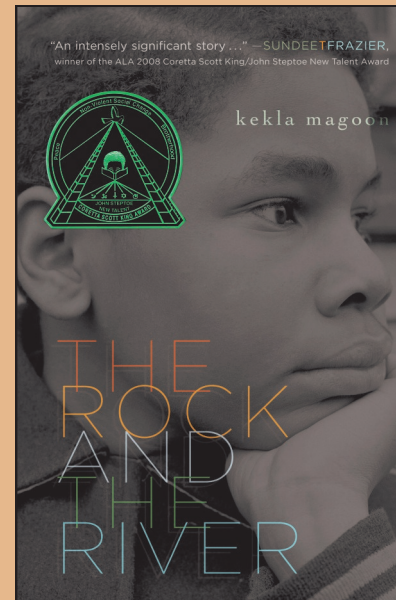
**Kekla Magoon** writes historical and contemporary novels for young readers, including: *How It Went Down*, *Camo Girl*, *Fire in the Streets*, and *X: A Novel* (co-written with Ilyasah Shabazz). Kekla holds

an MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and a BA in History from Northwestern University. *The Rock and the River*, her debut novel, won the Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award and an NAACP Image Award nomination. Kekla also writes non-fiction, teaches writing to teens and adults, and conducts school visits nationwide.

IN THE CLASSROOM  
with

# THE ROCK AND THE RIVER

by Kekla Magoon



- 2010 Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award
- 2010 NAACP Image Award Nominee
- ALA Notable Book/YALSA Best Book
- A 2009 Junior Library Guild Selection
- "Convincingly detailed..." —*New York Times*
- "Compelling..." —*Kirkus Reviews*

## THEMES:

BROTHERHOOD

NON-VIOLENCE

CHOICE

POVERTY

FAMILY & COMMUNITY

RACISM

SOCIAL CHANGE

"True to the young teen's viewpoint, this taut, eloquent first novel will make readers feel what it was like to be young black and militant 40 years ago....An important title for YA American history classes."

—*Booklist*, starred review

**1968, Chicago.** For thirteen-year-old Sam, it's not easy being the son of a well-known civil rights leader — especially when his older brother, Stick, begins to drift away from him. Sam has always had faith in his father, but when he finds literature about the Black Panthers under Stick's bed, he's not sure who to believe: his father or his brother. Suddenly, nothing feels certain anymore.

Sam wants to believe that his father is right: You can effect change without violence. But as time goes on, Sam grows weary of standing by and watching as his friends and family suffer at the hands of racism in their community. He begins to explore the Panthers with Stick, but soon he's involved in something far more serious— and more dangerous — than he could have predicted. Sam is faced with a difficult decision. Will he follow his father or his brother? His mind or his heart? The rock or the river?

# Classroom Connections

## Pre-Reading Activity:

Read The Black Panther Party's Ten Point Platform. Discuss the meaning behind each of the statements, and the overall goal of securing "land, bread, housing, clothing, justice, education and peace." Discuss the relevance of these goals today, and if these issues still relate to your community.

## Theme Exploration:

### Brotherhood

Discuss the relationship between Sam and his brother, Stick. Cite moments in which the brothers strive to protect each other. Sam is attached to the block tower he built with Stick. Does it have significance to Stick, as well? Why does Stick turn to the block tower as a hiding place for the gun? How is the tower a symbol for the brothers' shifting relationship? How does each of the brothers' relationship with Father affect their behavior toward each other?

### Choice

What does Stick mean when he tells Sam, "You can't be the rock and the river?" How do the brothers' choices differ? Discuss Sam's struggle to choose the right path. Name the choices Sam makes that lead to the climax of the novel. Could the novel have ended differently? If so, what actions would Sam have had to change?

### Poverty

How are class and poverty portrayed throughout the novel? For example, when Maxie fights with Sam (p.150-153), she states: "They [the police] don't need a reason. Maybe they do up where you live, but they sure don't down here." Later, Sam retorts that Maxie's family is "stuck up here in the ghetto." What is Sam saying about her neighborhood? Why does this hurt her feelings?

## Pre-Reading Research Project:

Compile a timeline of key events in the civil rights movement (1954 to 1968). Write a sentence or two describing each event on the timeline. Focus on questions such as: Who was involved? Where did it happen? What were the effects? Then discuss the timeline in class, or in small groups. How did these events motivate people to stand up for what they believed in? What hardships did they face? Were they successful? Can you spot any references to these events in *The Rock and the River*?

### Racism

Where does Sam encounter racism in his community? How does he deal with what he sees? Talk about the role of anger in the story. Which characters feel angry? Why? How do different characters, such as Sam, Stick, Raheem and Father, deal with their anger? How does this affect the choices each character makes?

### Non-Violence

Discuss how the non-violent civil rights movement is portrayed throughout the novel. Identify instances in the story when violence occurs. How does each character react? For example, when Bucky is attacked and arrested, how does the community respond? As a reader, how did you feel when this happened to Bucky? Compare/contrast your feelings to Sam's. Compare the activities and goals of the civil rights movement with those of The Black Panther Party. How are they alike?

### Family & Community

Sam is shocked to learn that his father is giving legal advice to The Black Panthers. Were you as startled as Sam was? Why or why not?

What does Mama mean when she tells Sam that Father and Stick are very much the same? How does her comment relate to Sam's realization at the book's end?

## Beyond the Book

Ask students to interview grandparents or others in their lives who were alive during the civil rights era. Question them specifically about civil rights demonstrations, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Freedom Rides, and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Do they remember these events? How were they affected by them? Also delve into the assassination of Dr. King, and discuss how their community responded. Where, when and how did they first hear the news?

Explore the role of popular music and/or protest songs throughout the decade of change (1959-1968). Play songs from the era for your class and discuss the social significance of the lyrics. Ask students to identify a recent popular song that speaks to today's social ills.

## Related Resources

### Helpful web links:

National Visionary Leadership Project  
[www.visionaryproject.org](http://www.visionaryproject.org)

Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta  
[www.cchrpartnership.org](http://www.cchrpartnership.org)

King Center  
[www.thekingcenter.org](http://www.thekingcenter.org)

The Black Panther Party History  
[www.blackpanther.org](http://www.blackpanther.org)

### Books to share:

*Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories*, Ellen Levine

*A Dream of Freedom: The Civil Rights Movement from 1954-1968*, Diane McWhorter

*The Watsons Go To Birmingham: 1963*, Christopher Paul Curtis

*One Crazy Summer*, Rita Williams-Garcia

**Vocabulary:** Here are some words to define using context clues, if possible: consequences (p.13), reverent(ly) (p.27), condone (p.77), realign (p.81), glimpse (p.88), perpetual (p.93), prominent (p.95), disperse (p.107), immovable (p.113), aloft (p.125), reprimand (p.132), engulf(ed) (p.133), guillotine (p.136), incredulity (p.137), pry (p.148), crevice (p.149), scrawl (p.164), aroma (p.166), holster (p.171), directive(s) (p.176), flail(ing) (p.177), respective (p.178), precarious(ly) (p.179), hypocrisy (p.193), fuse (p.220), deliberating (p.237), mourner(s) (p.266).