



Belle, The Last Mule at Gee's Bend: A Civil Rights Story

Calvin Alexander Ramsey, Bettye Stroud, John Holyfield (Illustrator)

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A true story inspires the moving tale of a mule that played a key role in the civil rights movement-- and a young boy who sees history anew.

Sitting on a bench waiting for his mother, Alex spies a mule chomping on greens in someone's garden, and he can't help but ask about it. "'Ol Belle?' says Miz Pettway next to him. "She can have all the collards she wants. She's earned it." And so begins the tale of a simple mule in Gee's Bend, Alabama, who played a singular part in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. When African-Americans in a poor community-- inspired by a visit from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.-- defied local authorities who were trying to stop them from registering to vote, many got around a long detour on mule-drawn wagons. Later, after Dr. King's assassination, two mules from Gee's Bend pulled the farm wagon bearing his casket through the streets of Atlanta. As Alex looks into the eyes of gentle Belle, he begins to understand a powerful time in history in a very personal way.

Belle, The Last Mule at Gee's Bend: A Civil Rights Story Details

Date : Published September 13th 2011 by Candlewick Press

ISBN : 9780763640583

Author : Calvin Alexander Ramsey , Bettye Stroud , John Holyfield (Illustrator)

Format : Hardcover 32 pages

Genre : Childrens, Picture Books, Historical, Historical Fiction, Animals, Cultural, African American



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From Reader Review Belle, The Last Mule at Gee's Bend: A Civil Rights Story for online ebook

Dolly says

This is a wonderful tale that describes the events in and around Gee's Bend, Alabama, during the Civil Rights Movement struggles of the mid-1960s. The people and culture of the area are featured as are the visits by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The story centers around an old woman describing these events to a young boy and it really adds a little nostalgia and warmth to the story.

The decision to allow Belle (and Ada) to pull Dr. King's funeral wagon is also described, as is effort the people of Gee's Bend went to to defend their right to vote. In both cases, white town leaders put up literal and legal road blocks to make the journey more difficult.

I really enjoyed the author's note at the end of the story that describes the actual events on which the story is based. There's even a picture of Ada and Belle, pulling Dr. King's funeral wagon that really brings to light the humble greatness of his journey.

Overall, it's a heartwarming tale, but the hard realities of our not-too-distant history are not sugar-coated. We really enjoyed reading this story together and I recommended it for parents reading with older children (grades 1-4.)

Lauren says

This is an important story of civil rights--one that exposes the racism and unfairness of the period in a meaningful way AND shows how the civil rights movement and specifically Martin Luther King, Jr. made a real difference to many people. I think many kids have a very pat understanding of the civil rights movement, with a simplified version of the Rosa Parks story furnishing a large part of their comprehension. Belle, The Last Mule at Gee's Bend tells the story of how a group of marginalized, poor African-Americans, inspired by Dr. King, rallied to the vote in the face of rampant racism. It is beautifully written and powerfully told. I wish the illustrations had a bit more solidity to them...the only thing keeping me from 5 stars.

Alyssa M. says

"Belle, the last mule at Gee's Bend" is a story about civil rights and how Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave hope to people, and how a mule named Belle is a symbol of that.

The visual representation of this book is amazing. The illustrations are so well done, and they support the story in an amazing way.

I really enjoyed reading this story, I think this is a great story to read if you were trying to teach about civil rights. I especially like how they use Belle, the mule, as a symbol of hope and perseverance. Great story and would recommend!

Kristi Bernard says

Title: Belle, the Last Mule at Gee's Bend
Author: Alexander Ramsey and Bettye Stroud
Illustrations: John Holyfield
Publisher: Candlewick Press
ISBN: 9780763640583

Review:

People can be famous and everyone might even hear about them from watching tv, listening to the radio or by word of mouth. But, what about others who have helped in very special ways. How do we hear their stories? And, who would have thought that a mule could be so quietly famous?

Alex and his mother are shopping at Gee's Bend for one of their famous quilts. These quilts saved the small community from hard times once upon a time not that long ago. Alex sat beside an elderly woman while waiting for his mother. They watched a mule across the road, eating collard greens from a garden. Little did Alex know that the old mule, named Belle, was famous. Alex embarked on a journey while sitting next to Ms. Pettway as she told the story of Belle. He learned about Dr. King, his march for freedom and how quilters saved Gee's Bend. Not only that, he learned the amazing story of Belle the mule. Can you guess how she might have become famous?

Beautiful paintings depict a very special time in African American history. The true story of Belle the mule is warm and touching. Young readers can embrace this bit of history and learn a little more about Dr. King and his fight for freedom. Parents and teachers can utilize this tool to teach, history, tolerance and how animals can play a huge role in our lives.

Michael says

Belle, The Last Mule at Gee's Bend was such a great book! This book was not what I expected to be. Calvin Alexander Ramsey really made a great story out of something that happened that was so tragic during the Civil Right's Movement. I never knew that there was a mule that pulled Dr. King's Coffin through Atlanta for his funeral. This beautiful Mule did its job, and safely pulled Dr. King to his final resting place, what an amazing history the mule has. This book is a great way to teach about the Civil Right's Movement which was another dark part of America's History with the terrible segregation that had happened.

Kristi Brent says

I love books that tell stories about animals who have made a difference in the world. So often, animals get looked over and no one realizes what a big impact they can have on people's lives in the world.

Margo Tanenbaum says

There are so many children's books about Martin Luther King, and I would never have guessed from the appealing cover illustration on this title that this was a book that touched on civil rights and especially on Dr. King.

Belle, the Last Mule at Gee's Bend, is a delightful historical fiction picture book which tells the story of an ordinary mule named Belle who leads an extraordinary life in the small town of Gee's Bend, Alabama. At the beginning of this tale, we meet Alex, a bored young boy who is waiting for his mother to buy one of the famous quilts that Gee's Bend is known for. With nothing to do but watch an old mule, he's happy to listen to an old lady from the town tell him a story about why the mule, who's eating her greens, is so special.

It turns out that Martin Luther King visited Gee's Bend to encourage its black citizens to vote. But when whites got wind of the voting drive, they shut down the ferry that crossed the river to Camden, where voting took place. That didn't stop the courageous citizens of Gee's Bend, who hooked up wagonloads full of people to mules, including Belle, to go around the river to vote. But that wasn't the end of Belle's special mission; she was also called upon as one of a team to pull Dr. King's coffin through the streets of Atlanta during his funeral parade. Alex learns an important lesson from this touching story: even an old mule can be a hero.

An author's note provides further details about Belle's story, particularly how Dr. King himself wanted mules to pull his casket when he died, with the mules serving as a powerful symbol of King's fight to help poor blacks across the country.

Colby Sharp says

I'm so glad that I read this book. AWESOME story.

Melyssa LeDay says

This book would be great to read after a lesson about MLKJ. When students know who he was, his speech, and how he died, this would be great to make a lesson positive.

Themes in this story could be to not judge a book by its cover, to fight for what you believe in, to make connections and friends wherever you go.

It would almost be fun to do an art project with kids after reading this book because the artwork is so pretty. Could have them draw/paint a mule and write a poem about the mule.

This book would be good for Civil Rights Topic.

Amy says

A rationale for selecting this book as part of the diverse literature set: Belle: The Last Mule at Gee's Bend is a fictional book that draws from real events and offers a fresh perspective of someone who witnessed and participated in the Civil Rights Movement. I also felt that the illustrations made a beautiful addition to the

story.

Text Connection Reflection: Text to text: A mule is used as a focal point of the story. I was surprised to find out that Martin Luther King's casket was pulled by two mules surrounded by throngs of people. This reminded me of when Jesus was carried by a mule into a throng of people on Palm Sunday just before his own death. Right away, I wondered how the mule might add additional meaning to the story. I was delighted to learn that its presence in the story created a richness of meaning. Here are the qualities of the mule that reminded of the plight of the African American people and the spirit of the men and women who instigated the Civil Rights Movement: They lift the burden of others who are suffering, they are strong, loyal, stubborn, resilient, humble, kind, grounded, steady, intelligent, determined and patient.

Discussion questions:

1. Remembering: What is Alex doing at the beginning of the story?
 2. Understanding: Summarize the story that Miz Pettway tells Alex.
 3. Applying: Give one example of how this book is similar to one of the other books in this literature set.
 4. Analyzing: What is the relationship between the people of Bender and their mules?
 5. Evaluating: What did you like best about this story?
 6. Creating: How would you rewrite the story from Miz Pettway's point of view?
-

Edward Sullivan says

Not so crazy about how the story is framed but it is a great story.

Barbara says

While waiting for his mother outside a general store in Gee's Bend, Alabama, young Alex happens to get into a conversation with one of the locals. She tells him about the mule that is munching away in a nearby field. It seems that the mule, Belle, and the citizens of this town actually played a part in the Civil Rights Movement, and after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, Belle was one of the mules chosen to carry his casket down the city streets, something the great leader had requested earlier. I actually like the fact that Alex learns about history in such an unexpected way, through the storytelling abilities of Ms. Pettway, typical of so much that is learned and passed down in the South. I also love the fact that this book explores a little-known aspect of the fight for civil rights, reminding readers that there were a lot of little-known individuals as well as better-known folks such as those in Gee's Bend who were involved. An actual photograph of Belle during the funeral procession and informational text add to reader interest and increase what is known about that particular period of time.

Kelly says

This book is a nominee for the 2013-2014 South Carolina Picture Book Award.

Belle, The Last Mule at Gee's Bend tells the true story of a very special mule and the people she represented. As young Alex learns from Mrs. Pettway, Belle's owner, this animal played a very important part in the civil rights movement.

Years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., visited the small town of Gee's Bend, Alabama, and urged the folks there to do whatever they could to vote. For many of them, it meant traveling by mule for half a day to visit the polls. Many of those who voted lost their jobs in nearby Camden, but, like their mules, these hardworking people kept going, no matter what others did or said to them.

A few years later, when Dr. King was assassinated, the people of Gee's Bend were asked to send mules to carry his coffin through the streets of Atlanta. Belle was one of those mules.

As Alex learns the history behind Belle and the Civil Rights Movement, so will young readers. This book is an excellent addition to reading lists about this important period in history, and it will also be welcome as part of celebrations for Martin Luther King Day and Black History Month.

While many of my youngest readers may not really understand the importance of Belle or what this animal represents, I do plan to use this book as a read-aloud, especially for 1st and 2nd grade classes. I think relating this important historical period to the life of an animal will make this story really relatable.

Betsy says

Certain historical figures inspire multiple generations of children's authors to go a little hog wild and pig crazy writing up their lives for general posterity. The biography section of my children's room, like many out there, suffers from an overabundance of Lincoln/Edison/Washington/etc. bios. Even utterly worthy folks like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. get a little overdone, causing one to wonder why folks even bother. Do authors keep writing about the same five folks because schools concentrate only on those people and therefore it is more lucrative to give them credit over and over again? How hard is it to find new takes on overdone cultural heroes? Enter *Belle, the Last Mule at Gee's Bend* by Calvin Alexander Ramsey and Bettye Stroud. Shelved in the fiction picture book section of your local library, the book actually places the bulk of its attention on a true moment in history, little remembered in schools and textbooks. Though it is couched in a made up story, Ramsey and Stroud have found a way to give Dr. King's legacy a new tale and take. The end result is a book that may straddle the line between story and truth, but there will be few who argue that it straddles the line between good and bad.

Alex is bored. His mom has dragged him along to Gee's Bend so that she can buy a quilt, but while she's doing so he's stuck on an old porch with nothing to look at but an old mule chomping on somebody's garden of collard greens. When an old woman joins him on the bench and introduces herself as Miz Pettway Alex inquires as to why the mule is allowed to eat all the greens it wants. She explains that Belle isn't just any old mule. Back in the day when segregation was rampant Dr. Martin Luther King visited Gee's Bend. After encouraging the residents to take the ferry the people find that the white folks in Camden across the river are so intent to deny the vote that they've closed down the ferry. Undeterred the Benders had their mules pull them along and around the river the long way. Later when Dr. King died, Belle and a mule named Ada were selected to pull his coffin along its funeral route. Of course state policeman tried to stop the mules from arriving, but when it was clear that there would be a national incident if the mules were not taken to the funeral, state troopers escorted the animals the rest of the way. That is why Belle, for all that she's a mule, is important. As Alex himself says, "even an old mule can be a hero." An Author's Note explaining the true history of this incident alongside a photograph of the actual mules pulling Dr. King's coffin, is included at the end.

Many is the children's librarian who has picked up a work of historical fiction like this and encountered what

can only be described as *Needless Exposition: The Book*. Let me describe it to you. In such a book a child character walks up to an adult and asks something along the lines of, "Grandpa what was World War II / Jim Crow / The Bay of Pigs?" (take your pick). Then the adult tells them what they want the reader to know and there you go. Instant book. Such stories don't always make a lot of sense either. Oftentimes you'll encounter a narrator who by all rights would have been told such a story long ago, or the adult narrator will mention facts that would be obvious to the child in the story, though not the one reading the book. Part of what I like so much about *Belle* is that Ramsey and Stroud really put a lot of work into giving Alex a reason for wanting to hear what Miz Pettway has to say. First off, he's bored out of his skull, so while an average boy his age wouldn't necessarily want to hear an old person tell a story, "he was curious and there was nothing else to do." Second, the reason he's curious is because Miz Pettway has said that an old mule is a hero and there's a mystery behind that statement. Most kids don't want to be lectured about history, but if you give 'em the double whammy of mystery plus boredom, you've got 'em hooked.

The writing works really well within the context of the history. Perhaps the most chilling moment comes when the white sheriff of Camden justifies shutting down the ferry and denying the Gee's Bend residents the right to vote by saying, "We didn't close the ferry because they were black. We closed it because they forgot they were black." It's just the right level of complicated to inspire family and classroom discussions of what exactly he means. As for Ms. Pettway and Alex, their dialogue is natural and unaffected. There's none of that stilted speaking that comes when authors have a tin ear for regular speech. The result is a book that reads aloud particularly well.

Reading this story I did have to wonder what year Alex existed in. Interestingly it is illustrator John Holyfield who clears up much of the confusion of when this book takes place. Holyfield's best known work to date has been on Phil Bildner's *The Hallelujah Flight*, a book that, like this one, took a historical moment in African-American history and cast a thin veneer of fiction over it. His style resembles that of fellow illustrator Frank Morrison, though his figures are perhaps a little less spiky about their limbs. So while librarians may read this book and then try to calculate the estimated lifespan of your average mule, Holyfield saves us some time and trouble by placing visual clues in his narrative. Alex, our hero, holds in his hand an old paddleball, the like of which I've not seen in years. His hair too takes on a particularly Afro like size and scope, suggesting this tale to be perhaps ten years or so after the death of Dr. King. That kind of timing works by my estimation. After ten years kids were learning the details of the Civil Rights Movement in school. King, to them, was more historical figure than actual person. Holyfield works primarily in the realm of acrylics. Brown appears to be the most prominent color at work here, and while it is by no means the only one, I did sometimes find myself yearning for some brighter fare.

Gee's Bend appears in children's books at regular intervals. Recently we've seen books like Patricia McKissack's *Stitchin' and Pullin': A Gee's Bend Quilt* and *Leaving Gee's Bend* by Irene Latham. What's nice about this book, of course, is that it looks beyond the quilts to the area's moment in Dr. King's life and death. It's a take never before handled in a children's picture book format, and that it slides as easily as it does into this category is a testament to the authors' skills. Lovely to look at, informative, infinitely readable. The kind of book you can simply enjoy reading and having on your shelf.

For ages 4-8.

Laura Weakland says

Great story! Excited to share with kids. I'm glad it was written. Great for teaching the signpost "memory

moment."
