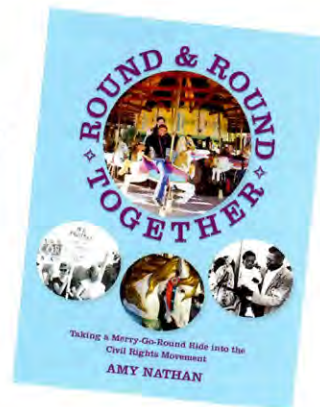


Round and Round Together: The Civil Rights Movement Comes to an Amusement Park

Mary Battenfeld

The rich cadences of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaiming “I have a dream!” have come to define the civil rights movement for today’s students. From pre-school on, children learn facts about Dr. King and reflect on his speech at the August 28, 1963, March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Indeed, King prophetically described the legacy of that August day when he told the hundreds of thousands gathered on the National Mall that this civil rights march would “go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.”¹



Compelling Stories

Fifty years later, the power of Dr. King’s words to “dramatize a shameful condition”² and move the nation towards equality remains clear. But, as Amy Nathan shows in *Round and Round Together: Taking a Merry-Go-Round Ride into the Civil Rights Movement*,³ civil rights history was also made that same day at an amusement park outside Baltimore, Maryland. This book offers a lesser-known, though nonetheless extraordinary, example of the fight for racial equality.

Gwynn Oak Amusement Park was less than an hour’s drive from the Lincoln Memorial, where Dr. King spoke. Nathan relates why the story of one amusement park’s integration is relevant to the larger story of civil rights in America. Her deeply contextualized, yet accessible narrative tells how eleven-month-old Sharon Langley came to be the first African American child to ride the Gwynn Oak merry-go-round. A news photo taken that day shows her father supporting her as she sits atop a wooden horse.

Nathan, a Baltimore native, is an experienced writer of non-fiction for children, adept at blending primary source research, personal interviews, and analysis into books that engage, inspire, and teach. She presents both a close-up snapshot and wide-angle panorama of the civil rights movement, framing these images within the compelling story of the decade-long battle to integrate Gwynn Oak. While the level of detail of the prose of the book may make the book challenging to some readers, teachers can read aloud passages as part of a lesson. The photographs and facts provide another way in.

Those upper elementary students who do engage the book will be rewarded with a complex and layered story. They will also be rewarded with a well-sourced account. Nathan provides

the source of every quotation, and a list all of every person whom she interviewed, the date on which each was conducted, and whether she did so in person or by e-mail. These clearly



Sharon Langley with historical marker and merry-go-round.

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documented and masterfully employed sources could also be a springboard for discussions on the process of historical research, and projects in which students interview grandparents or older neighbors to gather information about the civil rights movement.⁴

Relating the Journey

Round and Round Together establishes the setting with an overview of Jim Crow segregation from the end of the 19th to the middle of the 20th century. Chronologically organized chapters take us through the decade leading up to August 28, 1963. Each chapter skillfully blends examinations of celebrated national struggles with the less-well-known events in Baltimore. The Freedom Riders and Greensboro Sit-In appear, but they take a back seat to the fight of students to integrate a movie theater near Morgan State College, and the 1962 boycott of Gwynn Oak's All Nations Day, an annual international festival held at the park.

Though her discussion of events after 1963 is brief, Nathan does relate that, by 1971, most visitors to the park were African American, and, a year later, the park closed, a victim of a changing economy and the destructive Hurricane Agnes. Remarkably, the merry-go-round itself survived and, in 1981, was relocated to the National Mall in Washington, D.C., where it still spins, a symbol, as Nathan says, of Dr. King's "dream brought to life" (223).

Images to Remember

The photograph of smiling children riding the refurbished Gwynn Oak carousel, depicted on the cover of *Round and Round Together*, is one of many that enliven the text. Each chapter includes numerous archival and personal images, along with sidebars with individual stories and engaging facts. Some are well known, such as the picture of a Montgomery, Alabama, police officer fingerprinting Rosa Parks, while others, like a September, 1954 photo of a newly integrated Baltimore elementary classroom, shine light on nearby events and people. Often the photos and sidebars emphasize actions of youth, such as the efforts of black and white teens in 1948 to organize an interracial tennis tournament in 1948. My favorite photo shows two young women, both college students, one white, one black, quietly reading in jail after being arrested in a protest.

These stories of young people's activism underscore a major message of the book: "regular folks, kids included, can make a difference" (8). Moreover, a "follow up" section tells how the young people, both black and white, who fought to integrate the amusement park did not stop their activism when they grew up. Mary Sue Welcome, first arrested at the age of 16 for sitting down at Hooper's, a whites-only downtown Baltimore restaurant, became, by 2010, an assistant attorney general in Maryland. She described protesting at Hooper's and, later, at Gwynn Oak as "trying to make things better in my little corner of the world" (10). When only 11, Alison Turaj Brown, a white

child, was removed from a Baltimore trolley after she sat in back with black passengers. As an adult, Brown worked in anti-poverty programs and for Head Start. And little Sharon Langley, the first black rider on the merry-go-round, grew up to become, appropriately enough, an elementary school educator.

That *Round and Round Together* documents the impact of youth activism on the civil rights movement is only one part of the book's value for young readers, parents, and teachers. As Charles Mason, a leader of the 1963 protest said, "Young people today can't understand how things could have been the way they were, how there could be a time when you couldn't go downtown and try on clothes" (25). There are many examples in this book of the daily toll of segregation on African Americans of all ages, but particularly on children and young adults. The exclusion of black children from the Gwynn Oak Amusement Park was a sliver in a larger system, replicated across America, that barred them from opportunities and equal access to stores, streetcars, movies, ball fields, hospitals, jobs, and, of course, schools.

Resistance and Risk

The unequal educational system, finally declared unconstitutional in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, gets its due in *Round and Round Together*. But here, as elsewhere in the book, Nathan usefully complicates what has become a simplified story. For example, two years before the U.S. Supreme Court declared that in public education, "separate but equal... has no place,"⁵ national and local civil rights groups convinced the Baltimore's school board to allow 15 African American male students to attend the elite Polytechnic High School. The board members (eight white and one black) all believed in equal rights, and welcomed the Brown decision. Curiously, these same people denied the request to integrate Western High School, the girls' equivalent of Poly. Nathan, who attended Western, does not pursue this interesting detail, although it would have added the topic of women's rights to her consideration of integration and the civil rights movement more generally.

Nathan, however, does not shy away from describing the violence that is too often (though perhaps understandably) de-emphasized when children learn about the civil rights movement. In *Round and Round Together*, we read about and see photos of attacks on black children and young protesters. Eighth grader Keiffer Mitchell, the only African American student at Gwynn Falls Park Junior High in 1954, was not only roughed up on the playground by classmates, but also punched in the face by a white man as he walked into school. Though a photo shows black and white children swimming together at the newly integrated Riverside Park pool, Nathan also tells readers about the bomb scare and rocks that greeted African American children and their families. The juxtaposition provides a useful entry for teachers and students to discuss the tension between the movement's hopeful promise of racial equality and hate-filled attempts to kill that dream.



Sharon Langley in 2010 riding the same wooden horse she rode in 1963, when she was 11 months old and Gwynn Oak Amusement Park was newly integrated. The merry-go-round and historical marker can be found on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

The chapter, “Facing a Hostile Crowd,” recounts how protesters braved “the face of hate” at a crucial July 7, 1963, demonstration (176). Nathan gives facts (such as that 95 protesters, including a couple and their infant daughter, were arrested) and employs vivid prose that effectively puts readers at the scene. “[H]ecklers roared with fury and shouted racial slurs and obscenities” (176). A photo of Alison Turaj Brown walking arm-in-arm with other protesters, blood dripping down her face from a hurled stone, is particularly compelling. The caption tells us that protesters continued to sing the nonviolent anthem, “We Shall Overcome” even while under attack. Such details drive home the important lesson that the gains of the civil rights movement came against great resistance and at great risk for protesters. This protest was the turning point that ultimately pushed the owners of Gwynn Oak to integrate their facility.

Speak Up and Be Courageous

The conclusion quotes Sharon Langley, the first African American rider of the Gwynn Oak merry-go-round, now speaking as an adult: “[C]hange takes people willing to speak up for what’s right.” (222) The walls of racism that kept African American children out of one amusement park would not have crumbled with the simple passage of time. The happy ending of “kids of all races and religions” having fun riding a merry-go-round together was not inevitable. It took ten years of hard struggle and commitment by individuals and groups to integrate Gwynn Oak.

Courageous people, most unknown, and many young, demanded and forced the change that brought integration to Maryland, an open-to-all carousel to the National Mall and, ultimately, an African American president to the White House. By helping young people understand the struggle at Gwynn Oak⁶ as part of a wider national movement, *Round and Round Together* challenges them to be likewise courageous in their own time. 🌍

Notes

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream” (1963), www.archives.gov/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf
2. King, 1963.
3. Amy Nathan, *Round and Round Together: Taking a Merry-Go-Ride into the Civil Rights Movement* (Philadelphia, PA: Paul Dry Books, 2011). Visit www.amynathanbooks.com.
4. Kathryn Walbert, “How To Do It: Oral History Projects,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* (Pullout: March/April 2004), www.socialstudies.org/publications/archive.
5. *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954) www.ourdocuments.gov.
6. Students can scroll through the historical photo gallery at darkroom.baltimoresun.com/2013/07/let-freedom-ring-the-desegregation-of-gwynn-oak-amusement-park/#1. The history of this struggle is also briefly told at www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/entertainment/july-dec13/carousel_08-26.html.

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