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The Michigan Reader

Rosa Parks: A Life Take Home Test and Book Review

Rough Draft

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Reason to Read:

A Review of Douglas Brinkley's *Rosa Parks: A Life*

Students in my community college English classes often complain that reading is “boring,” even though I am a rather progressive instructor who seeks up to date material, such as *Rosa Parks: A Life*, a volume in the Penguin Lives series. Historian and university professor Douglas Brinkley published his biography of Parks in 2000, almost fifty years after she launched the famous Montgomery Bus Boycott on December 1, 1955. Surprisingly, *Rosa Parks: A Life* is the only adult level biography of its subject to date. (Comparatively, amazon.com offers numerous Martin Luther King, Jr. biographies.) Still, it happened again this semester. As tends to happen in every classroom with the regularity of the sun rising and setting, someone called the assigned reading material in my Michigan Reader literature course “boring,” before he’d even given a rather beautiful and surprisingly informative book about his own African American struggle for civil rights a chance. In contrast, David Poltz, writing for *Slate*, called Brinkley history’s “cheerleader” and explained that “Brinkley is the kind of professor freshmen love, because he is a kind of Überfreshman himself, wildly enthusiastic and infatuated with popular culture.” But, overall, my students don’t read *Slate*. Many don’t even catch *Comedy Central*, on which Brinkley appeared discussing his more recent book about Teddy Roosevelt. (Host Jon Stewart joked that Brinkley’s hefty offering should be read then folded out into a bed.)

Reading and the instruction of reading both require empathy. If a student's refrain of "boring!" hits me when I'm calm and collected, I might find a way to explain, without causing excess embarrassment, that the charge says more about the speaker than it does about the reading material. On rough days in the classroom, when I hear students shout "boring!" I lose my cool and on the way driving home and through the rest of the night fear for the future. I don't know how students will fare in the job market with their nonreading skills, unable to follow directions, unused to taking mental action, bearing poor attitudes about work. Being unwilling to think or feel outside of one's limited personal experience is a mark of immaturity, something employers tend not to prize. Tragically, like so many students I meet, the young man with the negative attitude was closed-minded about reading period, despite the subject matter. Though students seem to graduate high school with tired attitudes and closed minds, my job as an instructor in liberal arts is to open their minds to the possibilities, so they can achieve their goals of becoming lawyers and nurses.

So, in response to students who complain, here's my argument (which is called a "thesis" in English teacher land). [Read Brinkley's book about Rosa Parks in order to maintain a dialogue with history. Read the book to be better educated, more intelligent and well equipped to meet your goals in life.](#)

Every day life can wear people down. [Parks' story, as told with compassion, skill and insight by Brinkley, reminds readers about the dynamic power of history, which is alive.](#) Southeastern Michigan readers can look back to Park's beginnings in Alabama and often retrace their own family migration, from Rosa L. Parks Avenue in Montgomery, to Rosa Parks Boulevard in Detroit (which was formerly known as 12th street and the site of the 1967 riots). So many of us who live in the area now come from families that moved north for work in the auto

industry and its surrounding buzz, like Parks' brother Sylvester and his family did after he returned from service as stretcher-bearer in WWII. Parks and her husband did not move until after the bus boycott over a decade later. But she visited, about which Brinkley says she commented, "You could find a seat anywhere on a bus" (66). However, the 1943 riots led her label the city that would eventually become her home "a northern promise land that wasn't" (67). In order to share her words, Brinkley interviewed Parks and conducted exhaustive research of the known interviews and footage available on Parks, a process he discusses in his extensive "Bibliographic Notes." The Rosa L. Parks papers are housed at the Walter Reuther Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University in Detroit.

Since Parks has not received the amount of coverage as King, Brinkley's book is filled with details people have probably not caught in the wider culture. Eerily almost, it turns out the Parks had a run in with the bus driver James Blake twelve years before the famous December 1, 1955 incident. Not a one hit wonder, Parks worked for civil rights for decades before and after her civil disobedience, serving as secretary of the local NAACP chapter under E. D. Nixon, launching voter registration drives, speaking at the 1947 state convention in Alabama and running youth groups, Brinkley details. On the day of Parks' death, October 25, 2005, PBS's MacNeil Lehrer News Hours ran a piece on Parks that drew on Brinkley's biography. But at the time of its publication, *Black Issue Book Review* complained,

Since Brinkley has chosen to tie much of Parks' life back to December 1955, this book does not satisfactorily stretch the legacy of Parks beyond what many readers already know. Consequently, readers are left to wonder about other controversies, joys and challenges in her long, important life. While historically sound, on a personal level this biography, unlike the woman, often disappoints.

Michael Anderson of *The New York Times* agrees, and even calls Brinkley's prose "syrupy," but both publications also conceded that Brinkley is a more than capable storyteller and historian. Lacking competition, Brinkley has investigated Parks more diligently than any other author, building on the profiles published in *Ebony* and *Ms. Magazine*, which he credits as sources. Why hasn't anyone else (from the black community or elsewhere) stepped forward to write any book, let alone a better book?

With many books, articles and media appearances to his name, Brinkley is a star historian with pizzazz and heart who has been accused of seeking out the spotlight, yet Rosa Parks, the full-bodied historical figure, has largely slipped under the radar outside of her famous one-woman sit-down strike. Hence, Brinkley has done the world a service. He claims he got the idea to research Parks' story while taking educators and students on what he called a "Majic Bus civil rights tour of the South," (following in the footsteps of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* writer Ken Kesey). Like readers, Brinkley was surprised to find that no one had yet written a Parks' biography, so he willingly stepped forward. In *Slate*, Poltz explained, "Brinkley abhors the narrow academic history that has dominated universities. He scorns scholarly monographs and favors a democratic, populist history." Rice University Professor and writer for numerous high profile publications as *Vanity Fair*, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, Brinkley's career is following in the footsteps of his famous mentor Stephen Ambrose (*Band of Brothers*). Both have brought history to the average reader.

Despite the stereotypical divide too often reinforced between black and white, and between men and women, Brinkley's gender and race did not prevent him from telling a compelling story. If Parks had been a man, Brinkley suggests that history and popular culture

would have treated her better. (Brinkley relates that as an elderly defenseless woman, Parks was robbed in her own Detroit home in 1991, at age 81.) To his credit, Brinkley uses the much maligned “f word.” He explains, “As Parks’s activism grew, her dormant feminism also flourished” (78). Park’s full story reminds readers that there is still a need for feminism, as there is still a need for improved racial relations. Only four of twenty-six planned Penguin biographies were planned to cover the lives of women, *Publisher’s Weekly* reported. Brinkley wrote for *The Boston Globe* upon Parks’ death, “She didn’t force herself onto the crowded podium at the March on Washington in 1963, although she complained that women weren’t given a more significant role.” Highlighting Rosa Parks as a feminist may surprise readers, yet a college education traditionally exposes students to new ideas so they can broaden their horizons and make more informed choices in life. For example, young African American women may not fully realize the historic nature of their position in society. (Feminists often speak of the need for young women to ‘awaken’ to history.) Over and over, African American female students in my classes, distinguished from other groups in the room by race and gender through their behavior, choose to read Karrine Steffans, Monique and lately Steve Harvey when asked to find a nonfiction book in Composition I, instead of more substantial fare, so much so that I have made a note: write First Lady Michelle Obama and ask her to start a campaign for accomplished African Americans to write and publish more substantial books, and to promote reading. More adventurous African American students who range beyond this narrow avenue often find Detroiters Judge Mathis or neurosurgeon Ben Carson, or the inspiring story in *The Pact*. The second edition of *Remix*, the textbook I use in Comp I, features an excerpt from activist, actress and writer, Queen Latifah, and her memoir *Ladies First: Revelations of a Strong Woman*. Now, thanks to Brinkley, I can also encourage students to read *Rosa Parks: A Life*. The book illustrates the way Parks was

challenged by her race and her gender without baring her belly button or resorting to sexuality in any way. Maybe the African American male students who cried “boring!” responded as much or more to Parks’ gender than her race.

No one wants to ride the back of the bus, Jim Crow style, or fight for a country that would just as soon murder you for the color of skin. Brinkley’s book informs readers about racism using the most effective vehicle, storytelling. Brinkley’s narration of Park’s life and its place in the civil rights movement makes reader feel compassion, which is the best thing reading offers: a chance to connect to the universal human experience, to realize that we all share many traits and trends. The only way the people of the world will learn to get along is if we see ourselves in one another. Plus (so many advantages!), reading is a cheap way of travel. Brinkley ends the books with Parks meeting Nelson Mandela, who toured the U.S. after his release from prison. After a snafu (organizers in Detroit at first forgot to invite her to attend his reception), an unassuming Parks was able to meet “her symbol of hope” (229). Brinkley records Mandela’s arrival at the airport and his recognition of Parks standing in the receiving line: “Suddenly, he froze, staring openmouthed in wonder. Tears filled his eyes as he walked up to the small old woman with her hair in two silver braids crossed atop her head.” Brinkley explains that Mandela began to cheer repeatedly Parks’ name. “And in that poignant, redemptive moment,” Brinkley closes the book, “the enduring dignity of the undaunted afforded mankind rare proof of its own progress” (231).

In *Rosa Parks: A Life*, Brinkley manages to provide a thick slice of history and gives readers plenty of tips for further reading. Chief among those titles are three Brinkley says Parks believes to be required reading for “all Americans.” College students are advised to check out Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery*, W. E. B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* and James

Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (all titles penned by men, I must note).

Reading has undergone some very bad press. Good news! The truth is that reading is for everyone and not boring. Thanks to Brinkley, *Rosa Parks: A Life* presents a perfect picture of resilience from which anybody can take faith. A young Rosa Parks was determined to obtain her voting card, Brinkley details, and she did not give up until she got what she sought though it took years of patient determination. It also takes work to graduate from college. *Rosa Parks: A Life* can serve as inspiration and a mantra: If Rosa Parks, and Nelson Mandela, and Harriet Tubman did it, so can each every student, if they keep trying.

Civil war historian Bruce Catton, from Benzonia, Michigan, suggests that Americans can never leave the frontier. Since survival is not guaranteed, it's best to operate with as much preparation and knowledge as possible. Be informed about the past, fully alive in the present and aware that the future is now. Reading exercises and feeds the mind. Reading books like Douglas Brinkley's *Rosa Parks: A Life* can help readers better navigate their way in the world, armed with more keenly prepared senses.

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