

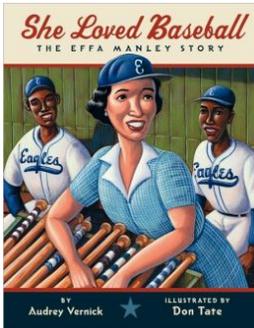
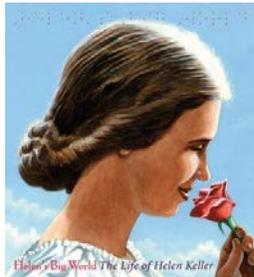
Children's Book Review

The Life Stories of Two Determined Women Championing for Justice

Rappaport, D. with Matt Tavares (Illustrator) (2012). *Helen's Big World: The Life of Helen Keller*. New York, NY: Disney - Hyperion Books. 48 pp., ISBN: 9780786808908 (hc), \$17.99 (Ages 5-8).

Vernick, Audrey with Don Tate (Illustrator) (2010). *She Loved Baseball: The Effa Manley Story*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers. 32 pp., ISBN: 978-0061349201 (hc), \$16.99 (Ages 5-10).

Reviewed by Kathryn S. Pegler, Eastern University, U.S.A.



How does one challenge patterns of exclusion, rejection, privilege, and discrimination? Frederick Douglas (Douglass & American Abolition Society, 1857) claims, “Power concedes nothing without a demand” (p. 22). Therefore, when injustices are present, it is up to individuals to acknowledge and confront them and insist upon change. Both Effa Manley and Helen Keller demonstrate this kind of agency in two beautifully illustrated books – *Helen's Big World* (Rappaport, 2012) and *The Effa Manley Story* (Vernick, 2010). Each of these women encountered prejudice and unfairness that unfortunately were customary for their time period, but neither woman allowed the traditions of the time to stop her in her crusade for equality and justice.

Many people, I believe, are familiar with Helen Keller and her incredible life journey and struggles in a world that excluded people with disabilities. However, most people may not be aware of Helen's long history of social justice activism. Moreover, I suspect that Effa Manley's inspiring fight for civil rights will not be as well known. Yet both Helen and Effa lived extraordinary lives that would enhance any educational curriculum: their life stories present vivid models of social justice in action.

As Audrey Vernick writes and Don Tate so beautifully captures in bold detail, Effa Manley grew up with a deep appreciation for baseball. She also was keenly aware of the egregiousness of segregation due to skin color. At a young age, Effa, a light-skinned Black child, was told by her principal “not to play with

those negroes in the schoolyard.” “Those negroes” were Effa’s sisters and brothers.

Throughout the story, Effa continually questions the myriad of unfair practices she witnesses. Time after time, the answer Effa receives is, “That’s just the way things are.” This pat answer did not sit right with Effa—she somehow understood these unreasonable practices were inherently wrong. As an adult, Effa strove and succeeded in correcting some of these wrongs. For instance, Effa organized a group of Harlem’s community leaders to form The Citizens’ League for Fair Play. This group was responsible for organizing a boycott that succeeded in pushing a White department store owner to hire Black salesclerks. Moreover, after marrying Abe Manley who helped found the Negro National League, Effa and Abe established a baseball team, the Brooklyn Eagles. Effa was the business manager for the team. Other team owners initially resented Effa because she was a woman; however, Effa demonstrated keen insight about business and baseball, and she ultimately won their respect. As an owner and manager, Effa’s main concern was always about her players and treating them with dignity. She was pleased when Black baseball players made it into the major leagues, even though her team was losing many great players. In addition, she was responsible for negotiating with team owners to make sure that the Black teams were paid money for their players, a practice that had not previously been followed.

When the Negro League ended, Effa feared that the rich history of the league would soon be forgotten, so she began a letter writing campaign to convince the Baseball Hall of Fame to recognize Negro League players as well. At first, recognition was slow and only a small number of players were inducted, but Effa persisted and wrote letters up until her death in 1981. As a result, the Hall of Fame continued to install Negro League players even after Effa’s death, and in 2006, Effa was inducted too.

Helen Keller’s life was similarly filled with activism, as portrayed in *Helen’s Big World*. Much of the story told by Doreen Rappaport uses Helen’s own words, while Matt Tavares’ vibrant illustrations superbly complement the narrative. In the illustrator’s note, Tavares shares how he initially struggled with trying to represent visually a person who could not hear or see. However, he eventually recognized that he was defining Helen by her deficits instead of embodying all the things she was able to achieve as a result of her brilliant mind. Tavares was not alone in his originally limiting belief, as Helen states: “The chief handicap of the blind is not blindness, but the attitude of seeing people toward them.” But the one person who never held this restrictive opinion toward Helen was her teacher, Annie Sullivan. In fact, it was Sullivan’s determination and dedication to Helen that was responsible for Helen’s transformation out of darkness and into light, as Helen reveals: “There is not a talent, or an inspiration or joy in me that has not been awakened by her loving touch.” Because Annie recognized Helen’s brilliance and her insatiable thirst for learning, Annie provided her with a myriad of life experiences—they sailed the ocean, rode tandem bicycles, and sledged down hills. Annie was selfless in her support of Helen. She attended college with

Helen and read her all the books that were not written in Braille. In fact, Sullivan read so much to Helen that she ended up damaging her own eyes.

It was Sullivan's unending belief in and support for Keller that fostered Helen's activism later in life. Helen was a passionate speaker and traveled extensively, addressing important issues of her time. Helen was opposed to the war and dead set against child labor. She promoted unions to protect the rights of workers, was a proponent for the right of women to vote, and advocated for justice for Blacks. Moreover, Helen traveled worldwide to bring about attention and to get services for people with disabilities such as quality education, healthcare, and meaningful work.

Both *Helen's Big World* and *The Effa Manley Story* are valuable narratives for classrooms, as they highlight significant social issues and demonstrate the significance of action. The power of boycotting or using one's voice through letter writing and public speaking to campaign for issues of discrimination not only can bring about awareness, but this type of action can also achieve change. To help students better understand the context in which Helen lived, they could investigate the educational opportunities that were available for students with disabilities during Helen's school years (1887-1904). Students could also research the opportunities for Black women during the Jim Crow era to discover the significance of Effa Manley's achievements. Moreover, students could examine issues surrounding child labor, women's right to vote, and racial equality to determine why those subjects were contentious during that time period. Finally, students could investigate what civil rights issues today Keller and Manley would be championing and what students themselves could be doing to activate change.

Reference

Douglass, F. & American Abolition Society. (1857). *Two speeches...one on West India emancipation, delivered at Canandaigua, Aug. 4th: and the other on the Dred Scott decision, delivered in New York, on the occasion of the anniversary of the American Abolition Society, May, 1857*. Rochester, NY: C.P. Dewey, printer.