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SUSAN MARCUS BENDS THE RULES

by Jane Cutler

About the Book

You wouldn't even know there was a war on, thinks Susan Marcus as she surveys her new neighborhood in Clayton, Missouri. There are no air raid wardens, no blackout curtains. It's so different from her old home in New York City: no tall apartment buildings, no bustling city streets. Worst of all, for the first time in her life, ten-year-old Susan encounters prejudice—against New Yorkers, Jews, blacks, and the Japanese. She must be circumspect about her friendship with Loretta (the daughter of the black janitor), for Jim Crow laws still exist in Missouri. Outraged, Susan decides to strike a blow against them. She's not going to *break* the rules, exactly; she's just going to *bend* them.

In the summer of 1943, one girl takes a small but courageous step toward equality.

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Literature/Language Arts

This story, set during World War II, contains many themes that are equally relevant to young people today. Ask students to choose one or more of the following to discuss in small groups or to use as writing prompts: [CCSS 3-5.RL.2; RL.6; W.5; SL.1; SL.2; SL.4](#)

Friendship—Susan has to give up her friendship with Marv in New York and Loretta in Clayton, Missouri, when she, and then Loretta, have to move to another place. Has this situation ever happened to you? How did you deal with it? How can people remain friends even though they live far apart? What qualities does a “real” friend have?

Moving to Another Place—Susan has to move from the busy big city of New York to the quiet small town of Clayton. Do you agree with the way she handles the move? Why or why not? If you have had to move to a different sort of place, how did you deal with it? What kinds of things did you do to make new friends?

Description—The author presents a very vivid description of Clayton. Write a similar description of the town/city where you live. What specific details should be included? Try to use as many of the five senses as possible in your description—sights, sounds, smells, tastes

(foods), and general feelings you have in that place.

Stereotypes/Prejudice—Several characters in the story show their prejudice toward certain people or groups who are different from them in some way. First, find examples of this type of thinking in the story; then think or write about whether or not you have experienced this sort of thing in your own life. This can include things you've seen in the news or things that have happened to friends or family members, even if they haven't happened specifically to you. What are some ideas you have that could help to erase prejudice and discrimination from modern life?

Making a Difference—Susan and her friends decides to challenge Missouri's Jim Crow laws by riding the bus together and then eating together at the Chinese restaurant. What is your opinion of what they do? What would you do differently? Do you think kids can make a difference in changing laws that seem to be unjust? Why or why not?

Rules—Susan's friend Marlene quoted an old saying, “Rules are meant to be broken.” Do you agree with this saying? Why or why not? How do you feel about taking risks to break rules that you feel are unjust?

Consequences of War—World War II affected people in the military as well as people at home. Interview members of your family or the families of friends who have been involved in any major wars to find out their reactions. What did they do? How did they feel? How did those who were left at home help in the war effort? Are war-related issues today the same as or different than they were during World War II? If they're different, explain how.

Writing Letters to the Troops—Susan's mother, like many others during World War II, writes letters to people in the military to cheer them up. This practice continues today. See "Electronic Resources" below for a link to

directions for students who wish to write letters to service members in today's military conflicts.

Geography

Use a U.S. map or atlas to locate New York City (which includes the Bronx, where Susan lived) and Clayton, Missouri. Use the map scale to determine how far apart they are. Use topographical maps to learn how the land is different. Use an almanac to determine the differences in climate and weather during the four seasons of the year.

Research / Online Resources

CCSS 3-5.W.7; W-8

The Great Depression—<http://fdr4freedoms.org/#categories/the-presidency-and-the-great-depression/snapshot-of-a-nation-march-4-1933>

Presents a short film about the Great Depression, as well as President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivering his famous declaration "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself" in his first inaugural speech.

World War II—<http://fdr4freedoms.org/#categories/the-presidency-and-world-war-ii>

Presents many other links related to Roosevelt's life, especially as related to World War II, including the internment of Japanese-Americans, mentioned in the book.

Writing Letters to the Military—<http://www.forthetroops.org/letter-writing-guidelines>

Presents specific guidelines for students and an address to which their letters can be sent.

Bar Mitzvah—Susan's friend Marv is preparing for his Bar Mitzvah. Students who are unfamiliar with this ritual can find information here: <http://www.jewfaq.org/barmitz.htm>

1942 World Series—http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/look-back/a-look-back-worried-by-the-war-st-louisans-slow/article_7c91df99-9fcc-5de3-af66-50ed23c2b8d9.html Presents a recap of what happened in St. Louis, Missouri, when the Cardinals beat the Yankees in the World Series.

Seeing the Real Thing—Students can search Google Images for photos of "Spaldeen" (actually Spalding) High Bounce balls and Spalding saddle shoes, both of which are very important in Susan's life. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ot1PcsP9DjI> presents a picture and a retelling of the Legend of the Blue Willow that Susan heard from the wife of the owner of the Chinese restaurant.

Biographies—Students may be interested in learning more about President Franklin Delano Roosevelt or Yankee baseball players Joe Di Maggio and Phil Rizzuto, or Cardinals Johnny Beazley and Enos Slaughter. They may search print and electronic resources for information and then present the information to the class in reports, pictures, or lists of facts.

Jim Crow Laws—<http://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/1-segregated/jim-crow.html>

Presents an overview of these laws, and leads to a simplified discussion of the Brown v. Board of Education decision, which desegregated public schools in 1954.

African-American Story Quilts—<http://bit.ly/1j7TYsl>

Presents photos of quilts possibly similar to the one in Loretta's basement home.

Classroom Activities prepared by Sandy Schuckett, school library consultant.