

# ASF Study Materials for

## FOUR LITTLE GIRLS

BIRMINGHAM 1963

BY CHRISTINA HAM

DIRECTED BY TANGELA LARGE

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## Characters

Denise McNair, *age 11*

Cynthia Wesley, *age 14*

Carole Robertson, *age 14*

Addie Mae Collins, *age 14*

Connie, *Denise's friend*

A chorus of 4 white girls

A chorus of 4 African-American girls

An Ensemble of young African-American girls aged 10

to 16: Fannie, Flo, Karen,

Lynn, Janie, Sarah, Rhonda

Several others of varying ages

*Setting:* Birmingham, Alabama

*Time:* 1963 and remembering

1963

## These study materials offer

historical contexts and issues, literary/dramatic analysis, and activities and resources on the work and the era. Adapt them to your class and needs. Activities are usually in light gold boxes. See language note on next page.



Playwright Christina Ham

## Welcome to *Four Little Girls: Birmingham 1963*

"What bothers me most is that their names have been virtually erased: They are inevitably referred to as 'the four Black girls' killed in the Birmingham church bombing."

—Dr. Angela Davis, activist and childhood friend of Carole Robertson, one of the four girls

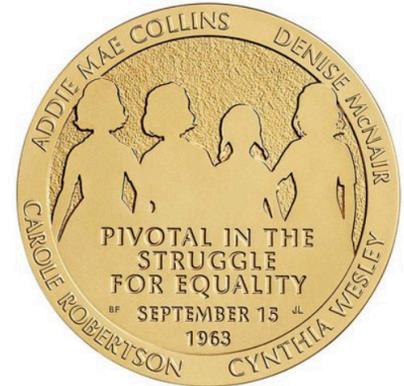
Playwright Christina Ham directly addresses Angela Davis's concern in her play, *Four Little Girls: Birmingham 1963*. We experience their long-segregated and now protest-filled world and come to know 11-year-old Denise McNair, and the three 14-year-olds, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Addie Mae Collins during the week prior to September 15, 1963, the day they get to participate in the youth service at 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama—and become history. They were young, just looking up and seeing the lives they wanted for themselves. They had dreams that never got to be—but dreams provide an apt image for the play's context, the 1963 Birmingham Campaign of the civil rights movement in the weeks before and after Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech during the march in D.C.

The play acknowledges their deaths but focuses on their lives and their world, their hopes for change and equality, and their dreams of being part of that better world. They offer us choices of who to be.

## Playwright Christina Ham and *Four Little Girls*

Christina Ham always wanted to be a writer. She shifted from journalism to English/creative writing at USC before getting an MFA in playwriting from UCLA. After some time spent in public relations and corporate communications, she returned to theatre in Minnesota, where she now lives.

Much of her first work in the Twin Cities was for children's theatres, where she loved those audiences' willingness to engage and the sense of "play" possible in those plays. By coming back to playwriting, she says "It gave me more time to understand what I was really wanting to write about and stories that I wanted



*Even the Congressional Medal honors the girls with names but no faces.*



*Ham's play gives each girl a name and face and explores her dreams as well as her destiny: top, Cynthia Wesley (14), Carole Robertson (14); bottom, Addie Mae Collins (14), Denise McNair (11)*

to tell." Her "calling as a writer is deeply and intrinsically tied to my spiritual life." In her work she is "looking to really bring stories to life in the African-American community that we don't normally get to see and we also don't know about, ... finding these footnotes in black history."

After a 2011 premiere, this play was selected to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the 1963 16th Street Church bombing with a reading at the Kennedy Center in D.C. directed by Phylicia Rashad, which streamed worldwide along with simultaneous readings in 47 states.

ASF is also performing Ham's play *Nina Simone: Four Women*, set in 1963 Birmingham.

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## Alabama



### About Language in the Play

Most of the racially focused language in the play is innuendo, since much of it is used by children, but there is one instance of an explicit racial slur. Christina Ham, the author, explains the inclusion of the word:

"The bastardization of the word 'Negro' into the word 'nigger' and how it was used during this period to subjugate African Americans (particularly in the Jim Crow South) is unfortunate. However, it was necessary for me to use this word in this play to document what life was like for these young ladies living in 1963 Birmingham, Alabama."



The corner of 16th St. and 6th Ave.

Quotations on church from:  
<https://16thstreetbaptist.org/history-2/>

## Four Little Girls: Birmingham 1963—Where Are We?

### Where: Birmingham, Alabama

**Founded:** 1871 during Reconstruction at a railway crossing

**Early success:** Was as an industrial center, based in mining and the iron and steel industry and as a rail hub—all driven by its economic advantage over northern cities of having non-unionized labor (mostly Irish and Italian immigrants and African Americans)

**Early nicknames:** "The Magic City" due to its rapid growth and "The Pittsburgh of the South" for its steel industry

**Early 20th century:** The Great Depression hit Birmingham extremely hard, but with World War II the steel industry rebounded.

**Mid-20th century:** The city became a center for the civil rights movement, led by local minister Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth. Social change met with bombings by whites resistant to integration pressures.

**New nickname:** "Bombingham," due to the number of Klan and other bombings of black residences and businesses

**City population in 1960 census:** 340,887—60% white and 40% black

**Current city population** (after civil rights movement and "white flight" to suburbs, from 2010 census): 212,237—73.4% black, 22.3% white, 4.3% others. Population of metropolitan Birmingham, city plus suburbs, is 1.2 million.

### Where: 16th Street Baptist Church

**Organized:** 1873, named First Colored Baptist Church—the first black church in Birmingham.

**Building:** After worshipping at two other sites, it moved to its present location at the corner of 16th Street and 6th Avenue N. In 1884 construction began on the brick sanctuary, designed by the state's only black architect and built by a local black contractor.

**Community involvement:** "The church, and other black churches in Birmingham, served many purposes. It functioned as a meeting place, social center and lecture hall for a variety of activities important to the lives of the city's black citizens. W.E.B. DuBois, Mary McLeod Bethune, Paul Robeson, and Ralph Bunche were among many noted black Americans who spoke at the church during its early years. African-Americans from across the city and neighboring towns came to Sixteenth Street, then called 'everybody's church,' to take part in the special programs it hosted."

**Mid-century:** "The church served as headquarters for the civil rights mass meetings and rallies in the early 1960s ... [and] provided strength and safety for black men, women and children dedicated to breaking the bonds of segregation in Birmingham, a city that black citizens believed to be the most racist in America."

### Things to Think About

- What is a city? Is it all its inhabitants? Is it the industry and economic interests? Is it the influential and powerful? Who makes a city what it is? Who decides?
- How do populations and the needs of those population groups change with time? How can that change and those needs best be addressed?
- What is a church or other center of worship or spiritual concern? Who does it serve? Just those of its persuasion? Look at the website of a local center of worship in your community: what activities does it offer—and for whom?



16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham

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April 8, 1963/Birmingham—refused service, "Counter Closed" at Kress



May 3, 1963/Birmingham—child marchers arrested and blasted with water hoses



April, 1963/Birmingham—Dr. King in jail, thinking about the "Letter"

## Four Little Girls: Birmingham 1963—When Are We?

"When" is a major focus of the play and a major question of the American civil rights movement. "How long? Not long..." Dr. King exhorted, as he also pointed out that "wait" almost always means "never."

As the play's title will not let us forget, we are in 1963, in the midst of a years long, decades long, centuries long struggle for civil rights in the United States. The equality proclaimed as self-evident in the *Declaration of Independence* had proven elusive and evasive in actuality—not liberty and justice for all. The 1950s and 1960s, however, brought the equality promised and then denied after the Civil War to a more promising moment. Making that change was the goal of the many groups working for civil rights at the time—equal opportunity.

Looking back on the 1960s from the agony of current police killings of unarmed blacks and the Black Lives Matter movement, it is clear that the struggle has not ended. "When" it ends is always up to us; it ends whenever we decide we are equals and live together as equals, or in Dr. King's more spiritual terms, as brothers and sisters. The play addresses that larger "timeline" by engaging with history and the timeline of the 1960s' civil rights movement.

### Contexts of Events

The 1963 events in Birmingham did not occur in a vacuum; they were part of a larger, highly charged (the dynamite image is relevant) context of political and social events and concerns. The push for equal rights met with pushback from vested interests, segregationists, and the Ku Klux Klan. That much pushing rhetorically and politically can prove volatile. The 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Topeka* made segregation in public schools illegal, and Little Rock, Arkansas was its first flashpoint. Law and actual change proved to be on two timelines, only one saying "now." By the 1960s the civil rights movement was insisting "now" meant "now", that the time for change, and especially legal change, had come.

The play addresses that "now" issue and also continues to ask us "when."

### Birmingham 1963 Events Timeline

**Jan. 14**— George Wallace inaugurated as Alabama's governor. His speech pledges "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever."

**April 2**— Police Chief "Bull" Connor defeated in Birmingham mayoral bid.

**April 3**— Rev. Shuttlesworth's nonviolent "Birmingham Campaign" to confront local segregation in businesses and schools gains support of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference led by Dr. Martin Luther King. The film *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) opens in Birmingham.

**April 12**— The City Council refuses all applications for a parade permit from Shuttlesworth and King, but they decide to have the marches and are arrested and jailed.

**April 16**— Dr. King starts writing "Letter from Birmingham Jail," a major civil rights statement.

**May 2**— The Children's Crusade begins; nonviolent school students march to city hall to protest

**May 3**— Police Chief "Bull" Connor stops the children's march with police dogs and fire hoses; police arrest hundreds of children. Pictures flood television reports and national and international newspapers.

**May 10**— Local business leaders agree to begin desegregation.

**May 11**— The black-owned Gaston Motel is bombed.

**June 11**— Gov. Wallace makes his "school door stand" to prevent blacks entering the University of Alabama.

**Aug. 28**— 250,000-strong Freedom March on Washington, D.C. led by 8 civil rights organizations; Dr. King gives "I Have a Dream" speech.

**Sept. 4**— A few black students enroll in previously all-white Birmingham schools

**Sept. 15**— KKK members bomb 16th Street Baptist Church and kill 4 girls

**Nov. 22**— President Kennedy assassinated in Dallas, Texas

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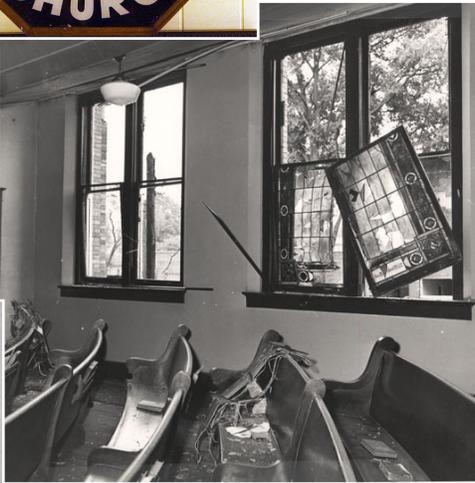
Right: The church clock, stopped at the moment the bomb exploded.

Below: shards from a stained glass window in the church, now in the Museum of African American History in D.C.



Left: The interior of the sanctuary with the windows blown out; the girls were in the area beneath the sanctuary.

Above: The stained glass picture of Jesus in the sanctuary, almost intact except the face had been blown out.



Above: Locals across the street immediately after the blast, in shock, horror, and grief. A car parked outside the church, destroyed.

Right: The hole blasted into the building and the damage the bomb did inside.



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## 'Letter from Birmingham Jail'

- Read and study the text of Dr. King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" as a powerful example of rhetorical persuasion. The text is available @

<http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-birmingham-city-jail-1>

At the end is the clergymen's letter that prompted King's reply. Watch how he responds to their points specifically.

Consider:

- how and why King identifies himself and his audience as he does
- what topics he engages and how
- how he uses reason/logic
- how he uses emotional appeal and imagery
- what tone(s) he uses and where
- what authorities he cites and their relevance to his audience
- and the letter's overall effect

- Look at the account of the letter's writing and getting its historical marker @

[http://blog.al.com/spotnews/2013/02/putting\\_a\\_mark\\_on\\_history\\_tour.html](http://blog.al.com/spotnews/2013/02/putting_a_mark_on_history_tour.html)

- Dr. King was arrested on Good Friday, 1963. An accident or a tactic?

## Activities for Birmingham 1963—When Are We?

### Activity: Studying Timelines

- Choose one 20th-century and one longer timeline from the list below.
- Study what and how each presents the facts. What kind of events get reported? Political/legal? Social? Achievements and/or problems/setbacks?
- Are there causes for what happens in 1963 according to each timeline? How deep are the roots? Why are the problems unresolved? What kinds of resolution occur?
- What effect does each timeline have on you? Do you see the issues the same way from each?
- What role does time play in these timelines? What kind of "line" does it draw? What does each timeline say about civil rights? Write or present your brief comparative response.

Modern timelines (pick one):

- 1948-2015 @ [https://www.bunkhistory.org/resources/123?related=838&relationship\\_name=RELATED](https://www.bunkhistory.org/resources/123?related=838&relationship_name=RELATED)

- 1951-1968 @ <https://kids.laws.com/civil-rights-timeline>

- 1954-1968 @ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\\_of\\_the\\_civil\\_rights\\_movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_civil_rights_movement)

Long-view timelines (pick one):

- 1472-2008 @ <http://www.ushistory.org/more/timeline.htm>

- 1619-2008 @ <https://www.nps.gov/saga/learn/education/upload/African%20American%20History%20Timeline.pdf>

- 1783-2006 @ <http://www.cnn.com/2006/EDUCATION/01/31/extra.civil.rights.timeline/index.html>

### Activity: Segregation and Integration

- Research when the U.S. Armed Forces integrated and when major league sports integrated. What effect did those moves have on attitudes and the civil rights movement? Who were the figureheads making that change? How long had African Americans been serving in the U.S. military or American war efforts? How long had black sports figures played in separate leagues? What record did African Americans have at the Olympics?
- Research Emancipation, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow for the background on civil rights needs.

### Activities and Resources on Time and Issues

- 1) Print out and display the 1963 Birmingham timeline @

[http://kidsinbirmingham1963.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Final\\_timeline.jpg](http://kidsinbirmingham1963.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Final_timeline.jpg)

- 2) • Listen to Their Voices: The 'Kids in Birmingham' website @ <http://kidsinbirmingham1963.org/living-history/> has statements and testimony from people who were children in Birmingham at the time of the 1963 church bombing. Explore some of these statements. How do they fit with the perspective of the play?

- Pick one statement that strikes you and discuss why.

- 3) • The Teaching Tolerance program of the Southern Poverty Law Center has a section of lesson materials on race and ethnicity @ <https://www.tolerance.org/topics/race-ethnicity>



*Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, and Dr. Martin Luther King, lead the march on Good Friday, 1963, dressed for inevitable arrest*

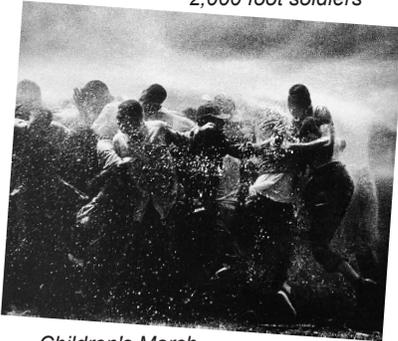
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The Children's March, May 2, 1963:  
2,000 foot soldiers



Children's March,  
Day 2: May 3, 1963



Headline: Monday, Sept. 16, 1963

## Four Little Girls: Birmingham 1963—Who Are We?

**Who are we in this play?** On stage we are Southerners. We are Alabamians. We live in Birmingham. Many of us are African Americans. Some of us are white. Most of us are youths. We live in challenging times, but we all know who we are—we just don't all agree on what that is.

The play introduces its characters with an audio-video collage of 1963—Dr. King, the sit-ins, the Children's March and fire hoses, the Klan, arrests, and Governor Wallace's inauguration speech pledging, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever," against which is heard a medley of hymns and civil rights songs, "Wade in the Water" and "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize." The medley fittingly ends at 16th Street Baptist Church—on a Sunday. Thus time starts more specifically and ominously in the play.

**We are young, church-going, and racially divided.** The chorus introduces the play's purpose, to remember "the positive lives" these girls had and the memories of that day they died, when "we first learned what it meant to be warriors." Black children had already marched the sidewalks and streets that year, carried signs, been slammed by highpowered fire hoses, confronted police dogs, been arrested and jailed. They are already part of their world.

An *us* and *them* racial divide emerges within the Chorus. The white subchorus starts with the "don'ts" that try to limit the black girls' lives. The way each group sings "Amazing Grace" contrasts markedly. Denise, Carole, Cynthia, and Addie Mae start planning for next Sunday, youth Sunday at their church—"Youth Day's the one day out of the year ... that's about us" (it will be)—while at the white church another call and response sounds privately when the Freedom Riders are mentioned: "Ain't they just want the same rights we got?" "Makes you think that's okay?" and then "We gonna hurt some people?" and "What you think?"

**Many of us form a Chorus, like a Greek Chorus.** Some in the audience may tend to think *chorus* means a group that sings or the repeating lyrics of a song. Such group expression is indeed part of the play, especially in the sense of group-think and prejudice. But the meaning playwright Christina Ham references is ancient Greek drama, where the chorus is made up of local people who witness and participate at the edges of the larger, potentially tragic action, yet who bear witness and try to understand its import, an act with its own burden and trust.

So it is in this play. Chorus members step out to speak individually, sharing phrases to make sentences, so we end up with group expression, the many speaking one thought as one group or as sub-groups, black and white. They speak to us, and because we, too, are onlookers, witnesses of this event, we may become silent members of the chorus, who begin by mentioning the absence of the girls' names in our collective memory.

### Things to Think About

- There are issues in this play. Watch how the group can unify and then split into conflicting subgroups. What divides them? How do the separate actions drive the play?  
Example: On the first Sunday Denise and others have gotten ready and gone to church. Then we hear two white voices saying, "We gonna hurt some people?" "What you think?" Those eight words affect the rest of the action, adding threat.
- We hear about group-think and peer pressure. Are those forces real, do they have any power in tense situations? What about bias and prejudice? Is casual bias OK, or can any bias be harmful? Does casual bias have consequences?
- Where do bias and prejudice come from? Most of the characters in the play are young people, in school and activities—in a segregated society. What are they "learning"? From whom?

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The bombers didn't stop anything; instead they added essential momentum to something that couldn't then be stopped. The most frequent analysis about the 1963 church bombing calls it "a turning point in the civil rights movement" and a crucial contribution toward the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965.



*Birmingham  
1963.  
Why did a  
national news  
photographer  
take this shot?*

## Resource

"Birmingham and the Children's March" (13 min.) This interview with one of the former child demonstrators, now a university president, discusses the children's role in the Birmingham campaign: @ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyZXMqUB67E>

## The Play's Structure: One Week in 1963

### The Week's Calendar Structure

The play starts on Sunday with an overview of getting ready for church and introducing each of the four girls. Then we follow the next four days, each looking more closely at one of the girls. Monday focuses on Denise McNair, the youngest of those killed in the bomb blast. Tuesday treats Carole Robertson; Wednesday, Cynthia Wesley, and Thursday, Addie Mae Collins.

### The Opening Section

The opening section of the play is choral, letting us meet and hear the social and historical context of segregation and local attitudes as well as the music of that time—spirituals that became civil rights anthems. The voices speak individually and collectively, introducing the girls and their truths—they were warriors as well as children. They are four individuals and also represent the experience of thousands of black children in Birmingham and far beyond.

The white subchorus confronts the black characters with "the awful 'd' word," a series of "don'ts"—"don't sit, don't eat, don't drink, don't think, don't live here"—the succinct imperatives of segregation: negation, denial. As children, of course, they also get some "don'ts" at home, too. The larger society restricts; the family and black community protects and supports. But everyone ends up in church on Sunday, singing the same hymn in different styles.

### Through the Week

The next four days are the "DOs" of the play, the inner promise, the dreams, the possibilities of these girls. They are also a deeper look at the context, the times, the issues of Birmingham in 1963.

In or near the transition moments between these days, we hear a hymn or freedom song—the pulse of the civil rights movement beats through the play. We often open with a glimpse of a history lesson from school, while the chorus presents sound bytes of the history they are amidst—educating us to the sound of Birmingham in 1963, the attitudes, the determinations.

The weekdays' sound bytes work through 1963 from January to September, giving snapshots and clips of Alabama and national

1963

September						
Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30					

events. Project C (for Confrontation) in Birmingham began with sit-ins at lunch counters, marches (made illegal because legality was denied them) as well as a boycott of local segregated merchants.

Then the leaders decided to involve the very children who were denied opportunity by the educational segregation. When the same policemen, police dogs, and fire hoses were used on children marching and singing hymns, the television and newspaper coverage finally seized the nation's attention. This was racism in action, and it was seen to be ugly.

The intense public reaction forced the merchants to negotiate slow changes, and a federal judge insisted the schools be integrated in the fall. The local white reaction had its virulent elements, especially the extremists in the Klan who had been bombing homes and businesses for any perceived affront. As several schools were forced to integrate in early September, four Klansmen planned another bombing, this time on the church that had been the initiation point for the marches, 16th Street Baptist.

### Sunday, Sept. 15 and the End

The play ends swiftly; we know what happens. A phone call to the church announces "three minutes," but almost immediately the four girls are dead.

Four suspects, all Klan extremists, were quickly identified, but justice took until 1977 for one, and until 2001 and 2002 for two more; one man died before facing trial. But we get their names, too—to hold them responsible for the act: Robert Edward ("Dynamite Bob") Chambliss, Bobby Frank Cherry, Herman Frank Cash, and Thomas Edwin Blanton, Jr.

And we remember the girls. We "lift every voice and sing" in honor of the girls, who were true to their God, true to their native land.

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Denise McNair—  
11 years old in 1963

"She wasn't going to let  
the world pass her by."

—Maxine McNair, Denise's  
mother, 50 years later



<http://kidsinbirmingham1963.org/we-lived-in-a-bubble/#more-549>

## Monday: Denise McNair—Who Might I Become?

**Music:** Monday begins with the hymn "Blessed Assurance." The thematic elements quickly emerge: the foreshadowing of "O what a foretaste of glory divine!" and "Washed in His blood" six days before the explosion, and also, in terms of the play, "This is my story, this is my song."

**History lesson:** We get a series of vignettes during each day—Monday starts with a snippet of a history lesson at school about what Birmingham *used to be* called, but "Magic City" does not seem as relevant or timely as "Bombingham," a moment punctuated by a glance at the separate water fountains. Land of promise ... for some.

**Denise as Character:** She is lively, focused on her education and homework, curious about the protests occurring (the intercut white subchorus dialogue is "Don't know what they got to complain about" and "Our maid is practically one of the family"—much untold story in that "practically"), and discusses boys as she plays dolls with her friends.

**Ambitions:** Though most girls want to be nurses or teachers, Denise wants to be a pediatrician—and her mother replies, "Don't see why not." Denise fantasizes moments of her medical practice and also checks out a library book on preparing to be a pediatrician—the years of preparation do not daunt her.

Already she and her friends put on skirts as an annual fundraiser for MD in the family carport.

### Elsewhere in the City...

Sculptor Elizabeth MacQueen (the *Four Spirits* memorial), who is white, was 14 in 1963 and living in Mountain Brook:

"The Sunday that Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was bombed, I didn't hear a word about it that day, not from my parents, not from anyone. When we got to school on Monday, there was kind of a whoosh. Just whisperings...."

**Issues Raised:** Segregation of lunch counters, a major issue of the early Birmingham protests in March 1963. The early father/daughter scene celebrates her A on a math test with a treat at the Pitheon down 4th Avenue (the black business center), but the end of the section has her write a play about this moment involving why she can't go to Kress, in which her father says, "they don't serve people that look like us in there"; she replies, "What's wrong with the way we look?" Her scripted father continues, "I only spend money where I'm treated with respect" (making it a choice), and her comment, "This is a true story."

**Her Hopes:** medical school and buying a vanilla shake at the Kress counter.

**Is it possible?** One of her close friends since kindergarten was Condoleezza Rice, who went on to serve as Secretary of State under President George W. Bush; Rice was the second African American and first African American female to serve in that office. Of course it's possible.



"In Mountain Brook, with those imaginary lines of demarcation, there were certain areas and neighborhoods you didn't cross. There was a lot we didn't know. We lived in a bubble. We hadn't heard about the Children's Crusade that May.... I had never heard about Dynamite Hill. It was really an impenetrable bubble we lived in."

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Carole Robertson—  
14 years old in 1963

"Their hearts were broken." They thought they were "supposed to be the protectors, and there was nothing they could do about it."

—Dianne Robertson Braddock,  
Carole's older sister, speaking  
of her father and older brother



## Tuesday: Carole Robertson—Who Might I Become?

**Music:** The musical segue is "Oh, Freedom."

In the play, again lines take on dramatic force, such as "And before I'd be a slave I'll be buried in my grave..." and "No more mourning..., no more crying..., There'll be singin' over me...."

**History lesson:** The initial context is shaped as standing in line for the segregated water fountains. The chorus discusses Gov. Wallace's "segregation forever" inauguration speech and his "stand in the schoolhouse door" at the University of Alabama, which federal marshals overruled, thus taking us from January to June 1963.

The classroom lesson is about how freed slaves post-Emancipation were allowed to vote, Carole learning "there was a time when we did have rights."

**Carole as Character:** Carole is active at Parker High School, playing clarinet in the band, amid a host of other activities, and taking tap and ballet lessons.

Carole and her friends look forward to the imminent integration of schools and the new Friendship and Action group of white and black parents and students meeting to deal with racism in the schools. Carole wants to go for "the adventure, to be part of history," even though Fannie adds "Some adventures can get you killed."

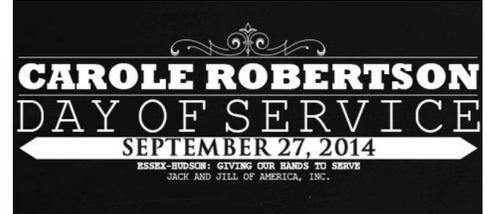
That is not a flip remark. Carole lives in the upper middle class neighborhood of Smithville, also known as "Dynamite Hill" because it was so often the target of racist violence: "It's hard to know when your home might be next," Carole says. Or your church.

**Ambitions:** Carole hasn't decided on a career objective yet (one of her teachers recalled she wanted to teach history or do something historical), but her mother has become a member of Jack and Jill, a black organization that fosters young people in social and civic duty and leadership—and sponsors a cotillion, something for Carole to dream about—learning to waltz and a ball gown.

**Issues Raised:** Throughout this section education is a focus, from Wallace's stands to the integration of schools which was mandated to occur during this week in Birmingham, and the eagerness of these girls for opportunity, for more educational challenge, for more of the rights America once briefly afforded African Americans. Racist bombings as scare tactics hit close to home.

**Her Hopes:** She looks forward to the spring dance recital, to all her school activities, and to an integrated future.

**Is it possible?** Carole mentions her older sister Dianne. She was the "little sister" to all Dianne's friends, one of whom was Angela Davis, who was born in Birmingham, lived on "Dynamite Hill," was given the chance to attend an integrated school in the North her senior year, and who became a major political activist and later an academic. Davis's brother played pro football. Of course it's possible.



**Commemorations:** A number of Jack and Jill Clubs across America have Carole Robertson Days or activities to commemorate her and the other girls killed in Birmingham.

In addition, three award-winning after-school centers in Chicago are named for her.

# FOUR LITTLE GIRLS

BIRMINGHAM 1963

BY CHRISTINA HAM



Cynthia Wesley—  
14 years old in 1963

"With [the Wesleys], [my] world opened up. The love the couple shared inspired [me]. Beyond gaining access to higher education and different circles, [I] developed new passions."

—Shirley Wesley King,  
daughter adopted  
after Cynthia died



*The Wesleys, both teachers, could not have children, so they informally adopted Cynthia from a single mother with eight children who wanted to give her more opportunities. After her death, the Wesleys adopted two more girls.*

## Wednesday: Cynthia Wesley—Who Might I Become?

**Music:** The musical segue between the scenes is "Woke Up This Morning" with its emphasis on "my mind, it was stayed on freedom."

**History Lesson:** The chorus moves the timeline from Wallace's schoolhouse door action in June 1963 to August's March on Washington and Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

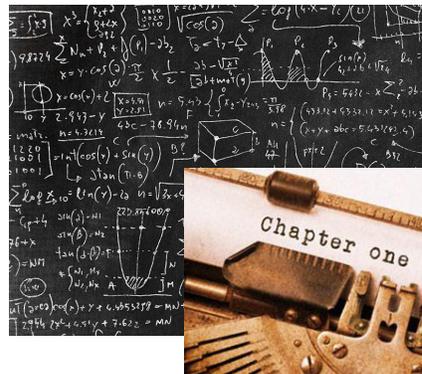
**Cynthia as Character:** Cynthia and her friends are having a pretend tea party while listening to records, playing at being sophisticated—cucumber sandwiches, having a maid (the inverse of the white chorus dialogue we heard earlier).

They quickly drop into reality and discuss Karen's participation in the march at Kelly Ingram Park, from which her facial swelling from the fire hose blast is still obvious.

"Hoses gotta way of making your skin feel like it's been ripped from the bone," she tells them. Cynthia's father patrols the Smithfield neighborhood as informal security, trying to keep everyone safe.

Cynthia's mother, a teacher, advised her students not to protest due to the danger, but if they had decided to go, she would turn her back and put the assignment on the board—and the class emptied. The commitment to the protest was growing.

Cynthia is also serious about ushering next Sunday because "it's like you the face of the church." That Sunday she will be.



**Ambitions:** Like both her parents, Cynthia also wants to teach, but at the University of Alabama. She is a math whiz, "a job a lotta women ain't doing." But she also wants to be a novelist at the same time. Karen wants to be an astronaut and Lynn a vet—and an actress. Science and the arts pull their interests.

**Issues Raised:** The protectiveness and caution of the older generation but also their understanding of the youths' need to participate in the freedom movement. Also the constant vigilance needed due to the ongoing threats of violence.

**Her Hopes:** To be a lady, to be a mathematician, to find a way to help the cause

**Is it possible?** The non-fiction book and film *Hidden Figures* revealed the crucial role black female "human computers" played in the NASA program during the space race—math experts such as Katherine Johnson, engineers such as Mary Jackson, and supervisors such as Dorothy Vaughan ("figures" who were women with names, like these four girls).

And the in-space side of NASA? Mae Jemison, born in Decatur, Alabama and only slightly younger than these girls, was an engineer, physician, Peace Corps volunteer, and NASA astronaut, the first African American woman in space in 1992. Black novelists and actresses? Writers Zora Neale Hurston, Tony Morrison, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, and so many more, plus a host of talented actresses.

Of course it's possible.

# FOUR LITTLE GIRLS

BIRMINGHAM 1963

BY CHRISTINA HAM



Addie Mae Collins—  
14 years old in 1963

"She just always wanted us to love one another and treat each other right."

—Sarah Collins Rudolph,  
Addie's sister



A news photographer got into the hospital room of Addie Mae's sister Sarah, who had been in the restroom with the four girls at the time of the blast. She survived, though badly scarred from flying glass and blinded in one eye. She is the "fifth girl," and says she feels like the forgotten one.

Sarah and Janie in the scene with Addie Mae are her sisters.

## Thursday: Addie Mae Collins—Who Might I Become?

**Music:** The ensemble segues with "Great Day," and its potent lyrics, "This is the day of jubilee ... De Lord has set His people free."

**History Lesson:** The choral commentary again testifies to what must be overcome to indeed be free. They note that the only black lawyer in the state, Arthur Davis Shores, had his house bombed on Sept. 4, the second bombing there in a month; he had been active in prosecuting to integrate the Birmingham schools and representing demonstrators in court. The violence is getting closer.

**Addie Mae as Character:** Historically, Addie Mae was one of seven children, hence her comment about hand-me-downs, and from a working class family, in which she was known as the peacemaker.

She and her siblings sold sewn goods her mother made, and they attended 16th Street Baptist Church, but, her sister said later, after the bombing the family could not take comfort there.

Addie Mae was also an athlete, a fine baseball player, and an artist.

**Ambitions:** She wants to be the female Jackie Robinson.

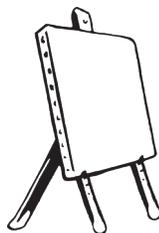
**Issues Raised:** The need for opportunity and the relentless repression of segregationists.

**Her Hopes:** She wants "the chance to play everybody."

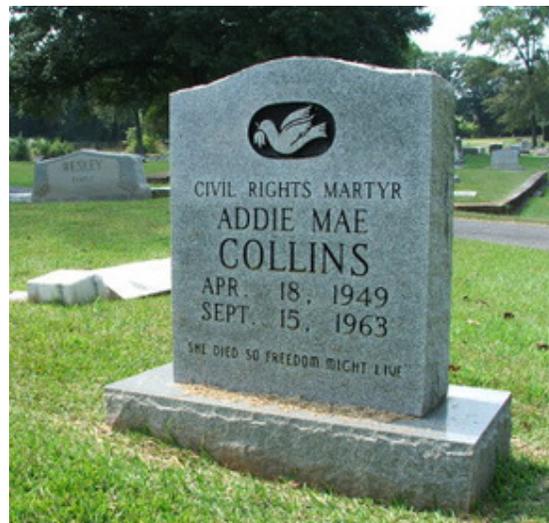
**Is it possible?** Black female athletes such as Wilma Rudolph, "the fastest woman in the world," were prominent during Addie Mae's lifetime. Rudolph won 3 gold medals and 1 bronze representing the U.S. in the 1956 and 1960 Olympics running the 100- and 200-yard dashes and anchoring the 4x100 relay.

Born in 1962, Jackie Joyner-Kersey is considered the greatest female athlete of all time, winning heptathlon and/or medaling in long jump in the 1984, 1988, 1992, and 1996 Olympics.

Of course it's possible.



**Commemoration:** A niece she never lived to know named a youth center in Birmingham after Addie Mae. There is also an Addie Mae Collins Community Service program in East Harlem that provides Head Start and other services to children.



# FOUR LITTLE GIRLS

BIRMINGHAM 1963

BY CHRISTINA HAM



*Young women singing in a Selma church before the march for voting rights, July 1964*

## This Is Triumphant Music

African American music is rich and powerfully evocative, whether spirituals, jazz, or the blues. "Jazz speaks for life," Dr. King said. "The blues tell the story of life's difficulties — and, if you think for a moment, you realize that they take the hardest realities of life and put them into music, only to come out with some new hope or sense of triumph. This is triumphant music."

*—Dr. Martin Luther Jr. in the opening address to the Berlin Jazz Festival, 1964*

## The Songs in the Play

Music is a powerful force; spirituals kept the souls of slaves focused on the path to freedom, and civil rights anthems proved galvanizing during marches, protests, and demonstrations. The imagery in hymns-turned-protest-songs is Biblical at its core, and the references that heartened many in post-Emancipation America before Jim Crow was instituted again inspired during the 20th-century civil rights movement.

Christina Ham's play makes ample use of the songs that were much a part of the soundscape of Birmingham protests in 1963.

### Song List

- **"Wade in the Water"**—refers to John 5:2-9, where the ailing could be made whole if they entered the pool first after an angel "troubled" it. The song also refers to deliverance from slavery in Egypt through the Red Sea and mentions the Jordan River. Urban legend has it that the song was used by Harriet Tubman in the Underground Railroad to get escaping slaves off the path and into the water so the dogs could not scent their trail.
- **"Keep Your Eyes on the Prize"** ["Hold On"]—is based on an older spiritual, "Gospel Plow," about steadfastness, though, as usual with folk-based songs, the lyrics shift, and "prize" is a modern modification, moving from a focus on the Christian life to equality. The Paul/Silas allusion is to Acts 16:19-26.
- **"Amazing Grace"**—from 1779; the words were by John Newton, a former slave trader turned convert and later a clergyman during a near-death experience in a storm. The tune was extant at the time, called "New Britain." It was common then to set new words to known tunes.
- **"Blessed Assurance"**—Fanny Crosby, blind since the age of 6, wrote more than 8,000 hymn texts. When composer Phoebe Palmer Knapp played her this melody, Crosby immediately said that the tune said, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!" Published in 1873, it has been in

the Methodist hymnal since 1889.

- **"Oh Freedom"**—Believed to be an Emancipation spiritual, the song celebrates freedom in this world and redemption in the next. It became a staple of the civil rights movement most famously associated with Odetta. Joan Baez sang this song at the 1963 March on Washington.
- **"Woke Up This Morning"**—The earlier hymn version of this civil rights adaptation kept one's mind "stayed on Jesus," but now it is "stayed on freedom."
- **"Great Day"**—another song of deliverance
- **"How I Got Over"**—a 1951 song based on a racial incident in the South when Clara Ward and her black singing group were touring the South in a Cadillac and were stopped by white men who taunted them. Her mother Gertrude suddenly pretended to be possessed by a devil and the men fled. Then the incident became song.
- **"Lift Every Voice and Sing"**—Called the black national anthem, it was written by James Weldon Johnson and composed by his brother John in 1900. It was first sung by a 500-child choir in a segregated school where Johnson was principal. Amid the spate of lynchings in the early 1900s, the NAACP adopted the song and spread it far and wide. It gained renewed power during the civil rights movement. The development of its ideas in the three verses has been called "praise, lament, and prayer." Its message of faithfulness resonates with many groups in today's



*At the March on Washington, August 28, 1963, the crowd of 250,000 joins the singing*



## Worksheet for *Four Little Girls: Birmingham 1963*

*These topics segue with the issues in the play. Use them as pre-show prompts, things to think about, or post-show assessments.*



*Birmingham students in a peaceful march to City Hall in early May, 1963*

1. This play deals with an historical event, a major moment in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Does it matter that what you see on stage really happened rather than being "made up"? What difference does that make to you?

2. Use some of the earlier pages or do some online research about the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, especially in Birmingham in 1963. What aspects of these race relations catch your attention? What seems different from today? Does anything seem the same? How and why?



*Peaceful student marchers being firehosed by police order in Birmingham, May, 1963*

3. Most of the characters are young people like you, growing up, in school, making plans, discovering their abilities, deciding what they think and value. If you were to be judged forever by your life as you have lived it up to today, what would others see and think? Survey yourself today—what are your concerns, interests, worries, hopes, dreams, annoyances, solaces? What's your life like? Take a verbal snapshot, a descriptive selfie.

4. Music is evocative and plays a major role in most people's lives. What songs define what you most care about, give your life purpose and direction, say what you stand for? Why?



*Parker High School student Mattie Howard arrested during the non-violent Children's March in early May, 1963*

5. Society can sometimes pulse with tensions between groups based on religion, race, age, gender, politics, socioeconomic status, various persuasions... and more. Where do these tensions come from? How do they get so intense? In a country based on the idea that "all men [humans] are created equal," how and why do we get so divided? Are our divisions more important or potent than our unity?

# FOUR LITTLE GIRLS

BIRMINGHAM 1963

BY CHRISTINA HAM



"Police Dog Attack"—  
closeup of dog



Another angle on  
"Children's Crusade:  
"I Ain't Afraid of Your Jail"



Another angle on  
"Fire Hosing"

## Activities for *Four Little Girls: Birmingham 1963*

### History, Art, and Commemoration

- How would you commemorate the civil rights marchers in Birmingham in 1963? What is a fitting memorial?
- Much of the action of the Birmingham civil right campaign turned violent on the part of city and state police and Klan bombers. How do you appropriately commemorate violence? *Do you commemorate violence?*
- Kelly Ingram Park, across the intersection from 16th Street Baptist Church, was where the marchers congregated before heading downtown. It is now filled with statues in honor of the civil rights movement in Birmingham. Look at the pictures of the statues shown here and consider the "statement" and effect of each work of art. Walk the path in imagination.

- Pick one of James Drake's three sculptures (1992-3) and discuss its aesthetic "point" and the experience of the sculpture. Each one is in two or three pieces because the walkway goes between. Why? What is the effect? Does it matter where you stand to view it? Does it say the same thing from every angle? Imagine yourself on all sides.

- Do Drake's sculptures capture the important aspects of the Birmingham protests in 1963? What emotions do the sculptures arouse or call forth? How do they leave the viewer?



"Police Dog Attack" by James Drake



"I Ain't Afraid of Your Jail" by James Drake



"Fire Hosing" by James Drake  
Imagine walking up to it from each direction.

# FOUR LITTLE GIRLS

BIRMINGHAM 1963

BY CHRISTINA HAM



"The Foot Soldier" lit at night

- The play, too, is a commemoration of the 1963 events. Compare its techniques with any of the sculptures'.

## Activities for *Four Little Girls: Birmingham 1963/2*

### History, Art, and Commemoration (cont'd)

- Consider two other, contrasting works of art in Kelly Ingram Park. The three sculptures shown on the previous page elicited some concern; the community felt the children did not appear to be African American. So another piece was commissioned, this one from Ronald McDowell, for a less conceptual piece. He was asked to use the famous 1963 news photograph of a police dog lunging at an African American youth for his sculpture.

Compare the photograph to the statue.

Describe the elements of the photo and the elements of the statue, the dynamic of relationship of the people and dog. What is the effect of each image?



"The Foot Soldier" by Ronald McDowell

- Respond to one of these analyses, both on the use of commemorative monuments. One is from the *Harvard Design Magazine* (start at least at ¶12) @ <http://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/9/the-past-is-the-present> and one the transcript of a podcast @ <https://medium.com/@emaina1/the-foot-soldier-of-birmingham-with-malcolm-gladwell-revisionist-history-podcast-transcript-82cbd4e628a3>



The iconic 1963 news photograph from a Birmingham march, inspiration for the statue

- Analyze the "Four Spirits" sculpture commemorating the four girls (left). Closeups are available online. What does it "say" compared to the statue above? Both involve an experience with violence; how do they portray it?

"Four Spirits" by Elizabeth MacQueen commemorates the four girls killed in the 16th Street church bombing. At the moment the bomb went off, Addie Mae Collins was tying Denise McNair's sash, as she is here. Denise reaches for six rising doves, one for each girl and for the two boys also killed in racial violence the same day. Cynthia Wesley sits on the end of the bench with a book showing a passage from W. B. Yeats's poem "The Stolen Child," while Carole Robertson beckons the girls to come along.



# FOUR LITTLE GIRLS

BIRMINGHAM 1963

BY CHRISTINA HAM

**Teachers:** We have a wide age-range of students attending this show. Please adapt these prompts and activities to your particular class, grade level, and current curriculum as needed.



Detail from Elizabeth MacQueen's "Four Spirits" sculpture

## **LESSON RESOURCE:**

### Birmingham Civil Rights

Institute Lesson plan on 16th St church bombing with worksheets @ <https://www.bcri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/16th-Street-Church-Bombing-Lesson-Plan-Updated-7.7.16-4.pdf>

More Lesson Plans and Standards for K-12 students at that site, including:

- Foot soldiers
- 16th Street Church Bombing
- A Change of Heart
- Women of the Movement
- Selma to Montgomery March
- Black Power in the Black Belt
- THE UNEQUAL RACE
- Southern Christian Leadership Conference
- Martyrs of the Movement
- Jim Crow Laws

## **Activities for *Four Little Girls: Birmingham 1963/3***

### **Storytelling**

- Are 14-year-old females "little girls"?
- The play presents a variety of points of view and specifies the use of both black and white actors. It suggests who the protagonists and antagonists are, but should we also label these groups as heroes and villains? Assess what value system the play has. How does it portray society at large?
- Describe and analyze what role the collage technique and choral aspect play in the work's effect. How do you respond to the use of many individual voices collectively building or making statements? Is there power in a group speaking or when individuals step out of and back into a group to speak?
- Describe how much you knew about Birmingham in 1963 or the civil rights movement before you saw the play. Did the play explain or help you understand why it considers this to be a major event?
- Describe and analyze what the individual scenes with each girl offer the play. What do we see and learn through sharing details of their lives? Pick one girl's experience and analyze it more closely. Describe what her particular experience offers the play.

### **Music**

- The play uses the songs of the civil rights movement, some of which were adapted from spirituals, and also uses hymns because a church is the focal site of the Sunday-to-Sunday climactic action. Describe and analyze how these two types of music work. What are the hymns about? What are the civil rights anthems about? What do they "say"? What effect do they want to have?
- If you wanted to inspire someone, describe the music you would choose and why.

### **The Wordscape of Our Lives**

- Listen to the wordscape of your world—in the halls at school, among your friends, at home, on media and online. How much of it is positive, supportive, encouraging? How much of it is judgmental, negative, snarky? Figure a rough percentage for each based on your listening for an entire day. Analyze your experience. Is it easier to be one or the other? If you have a higher percentage of one, why does that one predominate? What or who fuels it? How do other people respond? How do you respond? What gets "fed"?
- Compare your wordscape to the one the girls experience in the play. What are their percentages? What effect does it have on them and their attitudes? On their society and its attitudes (are they in one society or two)? Is the play aware of wordscapes?
- Consider where our wordscapes come from. Where do we learn our social "language"?

### **Don'ts—and Do's**

- Early on, a subchorus as a voice of society lists some "don'ts" for the black youngsters. Describe the effect of these "don'ts." Analyze what fuels them. How do the girls respond?
- Society seems to offer all youngsters some "don'ts." Are you aware of "don'ts" in your life? Describe what they are. How wise are they? How do you respond?
- What "do's" does society present you? Describe some of them, and compare what objectives or "do's" you set yourself. How do you do that? Why? Are they important?

### **In the Bubble**

- Sculptor Elizabeth MacQueen talks of growing up white in Birmingham in 1963 and feeling like she was in "an impenetrable bubble" because she was kept unaware of events around her. How does the play deal with our "bubbles"?



*Photo: Alamy*

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