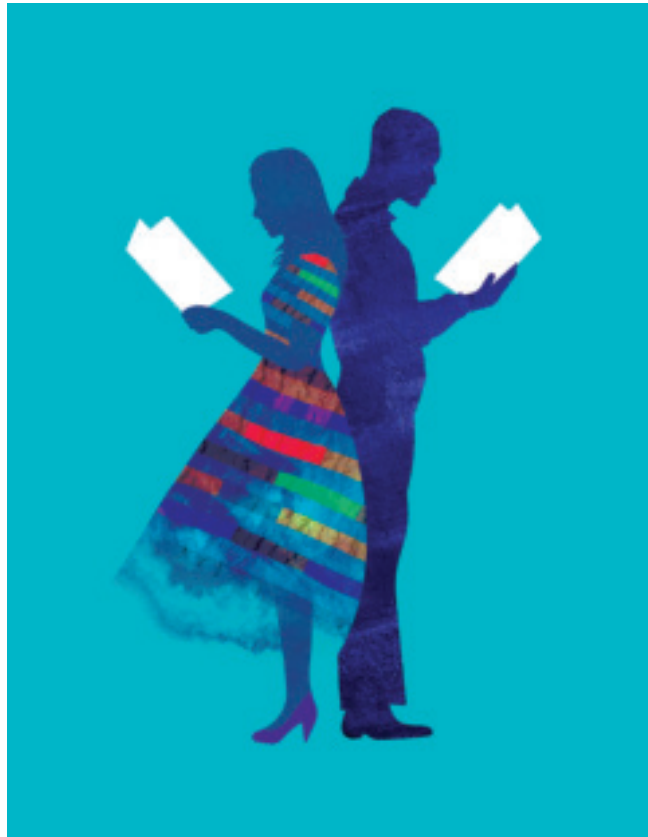


# ALABAMA STORY

## STUDY GUIDE



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**SchoolFest student matinees and the accompanying materials fulfill the following standard objectives:**

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.2 Write informative or explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.3 Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS *cont.*

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.5 Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

## SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

OBJECTIVE 6.13 Describe the role of major civil rights leaders and significant events occurring during the modern Civil Rights Movement.

OBJECTIVE 11.12 Trace events of the modern Civil Rights Movement from post-World War II to 1970 that resulted in social and economic changes, including the Montgomery bus boycott, the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School, the march on Washington, and the Freedom Rides.

## NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

TH.Re7.1 Perceive and analyze artistic work.

TH.Re8.1 Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

TH.Re9.1 Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

TH.Cn10.1 Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

TH.Cn11.1 Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

## PLOT

It's 1959, and the Civil Rights Movement is starting to grip America. In Montgomery, Alabama, a gentle children's book stirs the passions of a segregationist senator and a no-nonsense librarian. A contrasting story of childhood friends — an African-American man and a woman of white privilege who are reunited in Montgomery that same year — provides private counterpoint to the public events of the play. Political foes, star-crossed lovers, and one feisty children's author inhabit the same page to conjure a Deep South of the imagination.

## CHARACTERS

*Alabama Story* is based on true events. Some characters are based on people who lived through the controversy; others are original characters.

### Real-Life Characters:

**Garth Williams:** The author and illustrator of *The Rabbit's Wedding*. He was also the illustrator of classic young adult novels such as *The Little House on the Prairie*, *Charlotte's Web*, and *Stuart Little* and the author and illustrator of original titles such as *Baby Farm Animals* and *Adventures of Benjamin Pink*. The actor that plays Williams also plays Bobby Crone, Herschel Webb, and others.

**Emily Wheelock Reed:** The State Librarian of Alabama from 1957 to 1959. Raised in Indiana, Reed worked in libraries across the nation before landing in Montgomery, Alabama. She stood up to calls from segregationists to remove *The Rabbit's Wedding* from Alabama's libraries. Her obituary, published in the *New York Times* in 2000, inspired Kenneth Jones to write *Alabama Story*.

**Senator E.W. Higgins:** An Alabama State Senator. This character is based on four-term Senator Edward Oswald (E.O.) Eddins of Demopolis, Alabama. He was the son of a Confederate veteran and a staunch segregationist. Eddins targeted the budget of the library system when Reed refused to take *The Rabbit's Wedding* out of circulation. Playwright Kenneth Jones changed his name because, "I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt that he indeed might have had a change of heart later in his life."

**Herschel Webb:** A newspaper reporter with the *Montgomery Advertiser* inspired by the real-life Herschel Cribb, who extensively covered the controversy.

### Original Characters:

**Lily Whitfield:** A Southern woman from Demopolis, Alabama. She grew up in a wealthy family that owned Demopolis Cotton. Lily and Joshua were childhood friends.

**Joshua Moore:** An African American man from Demopolis, Alabama. His mother worked for the Whitfield family when he was a child. He currently lives in Detroit, Michigan.

**Thomas Franklin:** A reference librarian who works as Emily's assistant. He is a Montgomery native who lives at home with his father.

**Bobby Crone:** A senior Representative of the Alabama House. He is Senator Higgins' mentor and father figure.

## SETTING

This play takes place in Montgomery, Alabama, beginning in 1959. Much of the action of the play takes place in the offices of the Alabama Public Library Service, which in 1959 was located on Washington Avenue in downtown Montgomery in the building that now houses the Alabama Department of Archives and History. Other scenes take place on the sidewalk running next to Oak Park on Forest Avenue, across from Jackson Hospital, and in the State Capitol.

Kenneth Jones is a playwright, librettist, and lyricist. His play *Alabama Story* was a nominee for the Steinberg/American Theatre Critics Association New Play Award and a Finalist in the O'Neill Theater Center's National Playwrights Conference. By spring 2020, it will have been seen in 27 presentations around the country since its 2015 world premiere by Pioneer Theatre Company.



Playwright Kenneth Jones, holding  
*The Rabbit's Wedding*.

## ALABAMA STORY PLAYWRIGHT NOTE

In May 2000, while reading the *New York Times*, I came across the story of Emily Wheelock Reed, the former State Librarian of Alabama who had been challenged by a segregationist politician in 1959. Alabama State Senator E.O. Eddins demanded that a children's picture book — Garth Williams' "The Rabbits' Wedding," about a rabbit with black fur marrying a rabbit with white fur — be purged from the shelves of Alabama libraries on the grounds that it promoted racial integration. Their conflict was reported worldwide. Before I finished reading the article, I knew this was an idea for a play.

Strong characters and richly contrasting conflicts rarely just fall into my lap, but that's exactly what happened here. Vivid opposites — male and female, black and white, insider and outsider, Southern and Northern, private and public, child and parent, innocence and ugliness — were immediately evident in this now-forgotten slice of American history.

Emily Reed's story was widely documented in newspapers and magazines at the time, so a lot of source material existed, allowing me draw from and expand upon actual language and public personalities. In fact, the play's most outrageous proclamations from the bullying politician (renamed Senator Higgins) are direct quotes from the man who used to be known as "Big Ed." And when I read Emily's statement that "the free flow of information is the best means to solve the problems of the South, the nation and the world," I was inspired by the grandeur and universality of the sentence: This is a story about *access*, a basic human right. Little did I know that the words "free flow of information" make up one of the foundational tenets of librarianship itself.

On research trips to Alabama, it came into focus that I was writing a play about censorship rather than Civil Rights, although the two are certainly tangled in *Alabama Story*. This was a tale about white people threatening to devour each other — and seeking to protect each other — in a time of extraordinary social change. And about how talking to one other, face to face, about difficult matters is on that continuum of "the free flow of information." Conversations matter.

My trip to the small town of Demopolis, Alabama, was particularly inspiring. It's the senator's real-life stomping ground, in the middle of the state's "black belt," where plantation homes once thrived. I borrowed the setting to be the hometown of two characters I created for the play's reflective story. Lily and Joshua, a black man and a white woman who were once childhood friends in Demopolis, reunite in Montgomery the same year that Emily Reed was challenged. They are meant to suggest the private heart of the public controversy. Like the others in the play, they have a deep connection to books, and the quality of their character will be challenged in their exchanges.

I hope that *Alabama Story* sparks a memory of a beloved book, the person who gave it to you and the day that you realized that a "turning of the page" — whether moving forward in a book or in your personal evolution — could be both terrifying and wonderful. Maybe the play will also be a reminder that no matter what our differences, on some level, we all share the same story.

— Kenneth Jones

**Reference Desk:** A service counter in a library where librarians provide advice on research and the availability of books and other collections. Books that are not available for circulation, such as dictionaries and atlases, are also held at the reference desk.

**Notable Books List:** A list published annually since 1944 by the American Library Association of books that librarians are recommended to buy for their libraries.

**Uncle Remus:** A collection of folklore, songs, and stories told by the titular freed black man Uncle Remus, that feature Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox, two trickster characters. While not seen as problematic during the 1950s, Uncle Remus stories are now viewed by many as outdated and mired in racial stereotypes.

**Dexter Avenue Baptist Church:** A church in downtown Montgomery, Alabama. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the pastor there from 1954 to 1960. It was the headquarters of the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, an organized protest against the public transit system's policy of racial segregation.

**Green Book:** The colloquial name of *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, an annually published guidebook that listed roadside amenities that were friendly (or at least not openly hostile) to African Americans.

**White Citizens Council:** A local committee of white segregationists that was created after the 1954 Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*, which outlawed public school segregation. In Montgomery, the White Citizens Council opposed the Montgomery Bus Boycott; its members prosecuted boycott organizers and intimidated riders. They also published the *Montgomery Home News*, a white supremacist newspaper, that fanned the outrage around *The Rabbit's Wedding's* inclusion in public libraries.

**Voting Rights Act:** Legislation passed in 1965 that prohibited racial discrimination in the voting process.

**Civil Rights Act:** A civil rights and labor law passed in 1964 that outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in schools, employment, and public accommodations.

**George Wallace:** The governor of Alabama from 1963 to 1966. He was elected on the platform "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." He served an additional three terms as governor starting in 1970, and later disavowed his racist past.



Illustrator and author Garth Williams wearing his inspiration as a hat.



State Librarian of Alabama Emily Wheelock Reed.



Senator Edward Oswell Eddins, circa 1963.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### PRE-SHOW QUESTIONS

1. Do you think censorship is a good thing or a bad thing? Is your opinion influenced by what's being censored or who is doing the censoring? Who gets to decide what is appropriate or inappropriate for a community?
2. What was your favorite book as a child? What made it so special? Who read you books as a child?

### POST-SHOW QUESTIONS

1. *Alabama Story* ends with an epilogue that wraps up the character's stories and gives some historical context as to what happens after the events of the play. How did the revelation of the characters' fates, both real and imagined, impact your understanding of the play? Were the endings expected?
2. Emily Wheelock Reed is one of many overlooked figures whose work impacted the Civil Rights Movement. What other figures do you know of that have been forgotten?

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. **On Your Feet:** Form a standing circle with your classmates. Add an object in the middle, and place a post-it at your feet. Your teacher will read a series of statements (some are direct quotes from the play), and you will choose whether you agree with that statement, disagree, or fall somewhere in the middle. Consider the line between your post-it and the middle of the circle a continuum: when you stand near the center, you are in total agreement with what is being said and on your post-it you are in opposition to the statement (you may also stand anywhere in between). As your teacher goes through these statements, share your thoughts with people standing near you. Ask those on the other side of the spectrum to share their opinion. In what ways do you agree or disagree with your classmates? Highlight the various opinions of your class on the following statements:
  1. Censorship is not always a bad thing.
  2. If an organization/program receives funding from the government, they should accept government oversight.
  3. "You should know about the world beyond your world."
  4. "The South has room for only one viewpoint."

Add your own statements to the list. What other ideas would your class like to explore in this exercise?

2. **At Your Seat:** While the titles have changed, books continue to be banned or challenged in schools and libraries. Some are banned due to objectionable content, and some are banned because they negatively depict a religion, gender, or nationality. Check out the American Library Association's most frequently banned and challenged book list and read one of the titles. Share the book with your classmates: why do you think this book is challenged? Do you agree with the book being kept out of schools or libraries? What communities might be impacted if this book is banned? Research both sides of the argument and report your findings to your classmates. Should they read the banned book or not?