

ON PIONEERS AND FRONTIERS: A NEW BOOKS, NEW READERS EXPERIENCE

BY REBECCA DAWSON WEBB

Some of the women had never voted before, and they plan to now.

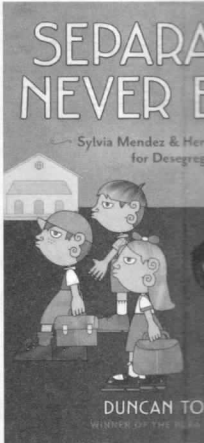
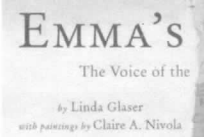
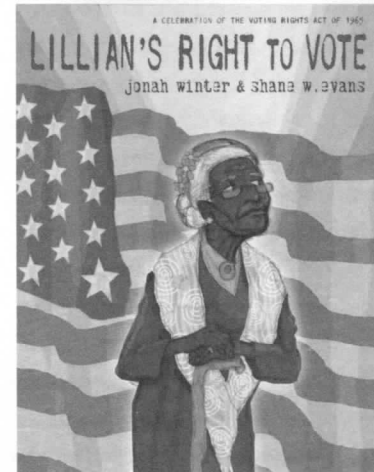
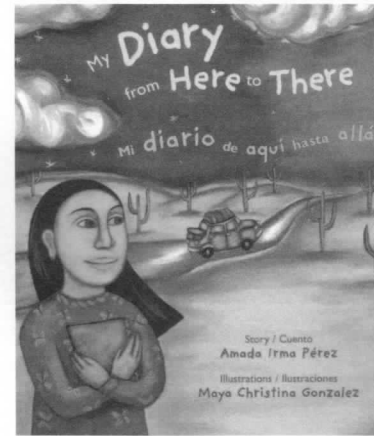
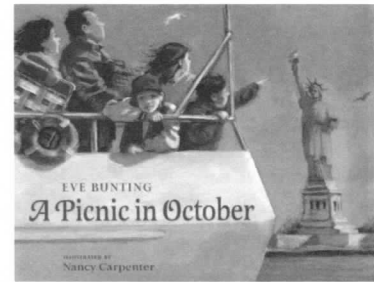
We meet in a windowless room that has the feel of a large utility closet, long tables pushed together in an awkward fit, under dull lighting. The women arrive carrying multiple, heavy concerns—longing for their kids, longing for release, which always feels too far off. They are working jobs, working programs, taking classes, and coping with stress and quarters that are too close. They are wary about trust. These women are acutely aware of rights—the rights they have lost, the rights they may not fully regain. But one right that these women have not lost, though they are incarcerated at the Southern Maine Re-Entry Center, a minimum-security women’s prison, is the right to vote. Maine and Vermont are the only two states in our country with no restriction on voting rights for felons.

As they drift into the room, the women’s moods are palpable, and often reflective of the latest issue they are coping with. Yet many remain remarkably positive. We begin by taking some deep breaths and checking in, acknowledging the separate realities of each of our worlds.

We have gathered to discuss the 14th Amendment, the central theme of “Pioneers and Frontiers,” the most recent series of the Maine Humanities Council’s *New Books, New Readers* program. The program—children’s books curated around a theme that

invites adult-level discussion—is targeted for emerging adult readers. Most of these women have little or no trouble reading. Still, because the books are short and the topics deep, *New Books, New Readers* works particularly well in correctional facilities. There have been other series with other women at this same location, ones on hope, community, friendship, and the value of sharing your story. The discussions have been rich and honest. The women connect the topics to their lives. “Pioneers and Frontiers” is a less intimate series yet still so relevant. It offers a history lesson in hope, struggle, and triumph. The books tell the story of those who have fought for equal rights: the right to vote, the right to equal treatment, and the right to fair access. The subject is particularly pertinent today.

Handing out the books the MHC provides is always a delight. Occasionally one of the women will recognize a title, and exclaim, “Oh, I love this book.” Receiving the books is a visual, tactile experience. The women gently open the covers and run their hands and eyes across the pages, taking in the many different styles of print and artwork. Recently, one of the women commented on how much she preferred the feel of certain books to others. We all started to pet the pages and noticed the variations—smooth, grainy, thick, thin. And then, of course, we had to smell them. Children’s books are a reminder of the joy of reading and



the way it is a full sensory experience. Almost all of the women in the class have children or grandchildren they will share their books with. One grandmother in the “Pioneers and Frontiers” group, who wanted to know more about the history of Thanksgiving, is sending the books to her granddaughter but asking her to wait to read them until they can do so together.

Around our joined tables, we read aloud. We look at pictures. We talk about the Constitution and the Bill

COMING TO AMERICA

THE STORY OF IMMIGRATION

BY BETSY MAESTRO

ILLUSTRATED BY SUSANNAH RYAN



SEPARATE IS NEVER EQUAL

The Family's Fight for Segregation



by Juan Felipe

Rosa

Nikki Giovanni

Illustrated by Bryan Collier



of Rights. The women reflect on which of the Bill of Rights matters to them most. They all value the 4th Amendment that protects the right to privacy and prohibits warrantless search and seizure. One of the women is particularly interested in the 8th Amendment which prohibits “cruel and unusual punishment;” she is writing a paper about the death penalty. We note how many of the first ten amendments set down rules about what constitutes a fair trial. The women observe how much they don’t remember or never

knew from their history classes. But they are interested in learning now.

We focus on the 14th Amendment,

the one that is cited in more legal cases than any other because of its Due Process and Equal Protection clauses. We learn about its ratification in 1868 which granted “all persons born or naturalized in the United States,” including our newly freed slaves, “equal protection of the laws.” And then reading *Granddaddy’s Gift*, we see the way that Jim Crow laws turned African Americans, newly minted citizens, into second-class ones who could not vote unless they were able to pass a literacy test or pay a poll tax and be brave enough to face the threat of violence. *Freedom on the Menu* and *Rosa* remind us of those who protested Jim Crow laws with sit-ins at lunch counters and bus boycotts during the 1960s. *Lillian’s Right to Vote* celebrates the 1965 Voting Rights Act, whose key provision — that promised federal oversight to ensure that any changes to voting laws were not racially discriminatory — was struck down by the Supreme Court in 2013. We talk about all the disenfranchised in this country and the voting restrictions that were in place in 14 states this fall for the first time in 50 years for a presidential election.

Some of the books address the fraught issue of immigration. *Coming to America* tells the history of immigration and how it started back with the nomads who traveled to Alaska from Asia during the Ice Age. In *Emma’s Poem*, we learn about the source of the words: “Give me your tired, your poor. Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” And we see an Italian grandmother in *Picnic in October* celebrating this invitation and thanking Lady Liberty for taking her in. These books remind us that we all come from immigrants, many of whom came

to America looking for a better future.

We are also reminded that the journey to a possible better life is not easy. *My Diary from Here to There* offers us the perspective of a young Mexican girl making the difficult transition to life in the United States, where her father, a legal citizen, has come to find work picking fruit in the fields of California. And *Separate is Never Equal* highlights the fact that hard-won dreams are achieved through determination and struggle, like the fight for equal access to a quality education.

These are important reminders, especially now.

This yearning — for equal rights, for a better future, more opportunities or a second chance — is something we all share. Certainly these incarcerated women do. We all want our stories to be heard and our voices to matter.

And this is what *New Books, New Readers* does: it connects through stories — the books to the people, the individuals to each other, the larger themes to the particulars. Children’s books are such a simple delivery method, but such a potent opening for conversation and greater understanding.

Rebecca Dawson Webb is a regular facilitator for MHC programs, including Let’s Talk About It and New Books, New Readers. She is also a longtime writing coach, teacher, and editor, who leads memoir writing workshops and is passionate about helping people share their stories.