STUDY GUIDE

FOUR LITTLE GIRL
BIRMINGHAM, 1963

By
Christina Ham

FAIR School-Crystal
March 2016
ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

PLAYWRIGHT – CHRISTINA HAM

Christina Ham's plays have been developed and produced both nationally and internationally with the Kennedy Center, Center Theater Group, The Guthrie Theater, Ensemble Studio Theatre, The Goodman Theater, Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, by Tony Award winning producer Arielle Tepper Madover off-Broadway at Theater Row, SteppingStone Theatre, and the Tokyo International Arts Festival among many others.


Christina is a two-time recipient of a McKnight Fellowship in Playwriting and a Jerome Fellowship from the Playwrights’ Center in Minneapolis, the Marianne Murphy Women & Philanthropy Award in Playwriting, a Minnesota State Arts Board Cultural Collaboration Grant, and a MacDowell Colony Residency. She is the recent recipient of a 2015 Travel and Study Grant from the Jerome Foundation where she will travel to Dublin, Ireland and work with The Abbey Theatre for her new play *Niagara* that looks at the parallels between the Irish and Harlem Renaissances. Most recently she was a nominee for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for her play *Scapegoat* that was also included in the 2014 and 2015 editions of The List compiled by The Kilroys and described in the New York Times as “one of the most excellent new plays by female-identified authors of last year”, and she’s been nominated for Center Theater Group’s Richard E. Sherwood Award for Distinguished Emerging Theater Artist.

Christian has received commissions from The Guthrie Theater, Ensemble Studio Theatre/Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and Park Square Theatre among many others. Her feature *626 Broadway* was a semi-finalist for Paramount Pictures’ Chesterfield Writer’s Film Project and her feature *Booker* was a finalist for Tribeca Film Institute’s All Access program.

Christina’s plays are published by Dramatic Publishing, Heinemann, PlayScripts, Inc., Smith and Kraus, and featured in the Special Collections of the Literature and Fiction Department at the Central Library in Los Angeles as part of their Audrey Skirball-Kenis Play Collection as one of 800 unpublished plays that were produced in Los Angeles.

Christina is a former member of the Workhaus Collective, an ensemble of nationally known Minneapolis-based playwrights who have been producing innovative and highly theatrical work in
the Twin Cities since 2006 as the company-in-residence at the Playwrights' Center. She is the Program Coordinator for the Many Voices Fellowship Program at the Playwrights' Center where she's mentored emerging playwrights of color for the last nine years. She is also a professor of black theater history and playwriting at Augsburg College. A graduate of the University of Southern California and a MFA in Playwriting from The UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television where she was a Graduate Opportunity Fellow, Christina is a Core Writer at the Playwrights' Center, and a member of The Dramatists Guild of America.

--Taken from www.christinaham.com

QUESTIONS FOR THE PLAYWRIGHT

After the school performances, at 10:00AM and 1:00PM on March 17, the playwright, director and members of the cast will be available for a short, moderated talk back session on the creation of the play. Please go over the meaning and purpose of a talk back with your students and have them prepare written questions for the playwright, director or cast. Not all questions will be able to be answered, but students should be mindful that the play creators will be available as a resource.
CAROL DENISE MCNAIR

Born Nov. 17, 1951, Carol Denise McNair was the first child of photo shop owner Chris and schoolteacher Maxine McNair. Her playmates called her Niecie. She was an inquisitive girl who never understood why she couldn’t get a sandwich at the same counter as white children. A pupil at Center Street Elementary School, she had a knack of gathering neighborhood children to play on the block. She held tea parties, belonged to the Brownies and played baseball. Denise, who dreamed of being a pediatrician, asked the neighborhood children to put on skits and dance routines and to read poetry in a big production to raise money for muscular dystrophy. It became an annual event. People gathered in the yard to watch the show in Denise’s carport — the main stage. Children donated their pennies, dimes and nickels. Adults gave larger sums. The muscular dystrophy fund-raiser was always Denise’s project — one that nobody refused.

CYNTHIA WESLEY

Born April 30, 1949, Cynthia Wesley was the first adopted daughter of Claude and Gertrude Wesley (both teachers). Cynthia was a petite girl with a narrow face and size 2 dress. Cynthia’s mother made her clothes, which fit her thin frame perfectly. She attended the now-defunct Ullman High School, where she did well in math, reading and the band. She invited friends to parties in her backyard, playing soulful tunes and serving refreshments.
CAROLE ROBERTSON

Born April 24, 1949, Carole Robertson was the third child of Alpha and Alvin Robertson and her older siblings were Dianne and Alvin. Her father was a band master at an elementary school and her mother was a librarian. Carole was an avid reader and straight-A student who belonged to Jack and Jill of America, the Girl Scouts, the Parker High School marching band and science club. She also sang in the choir when she attended Wilkerson Elementary School. Carole grew up in a Smithfield home that was full of love, friends and the aroma of good cooking, especially her mother’s spaghetti. In 1976, Chicago residents established the Carole Robertson Center for Learning, a social service agency that serves children and their families. Named after Carole, it is dedicated to the memory of all four girls.

ADDIE MAE COLLINS

Addie Mae Collins was born April 18, 1949. She was one of seven children born to Oscar Collins, a janitor, and Alice, a homemaker. Addie’s family was the poorest of the four. “It was clear that she lacked things,” recalls Rev. John Cross, the pastor of the church at the time of the bombing. “But she was a quiet, sweet girl.” And, Sarah adds, a budding artist: “She could draw people real good.” When disagreements erupted among the siblings inside the home on Sixth Court West, Addie was the peacemaker. The Hill Elementary School eighth-grader loved to pitch while playing ball, too. “I remember that underhand,” said older sister Janie.

Taken from: http://www.nathanielturner.com/bluesforbirminghamfour.htm
FOUR LITTLE GIRLS: Birmingham 1963

ABOUT THE PLAY

Clockwise from left: Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, Denise McNair, and Addie Mae Collins.

PLAY SYNOPSIS

Every child imagines what they want to be when they grow up. The four little girls who attended the 16th Street Baptist Church were no exception.

This play centers on Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, and Addie Mae Collins, four little girls who are multi-talented and bursting with promise and who share their hopes and dreams against the backdrop of the civil rights movement. While Denise dreams of becoming a doctor, Carole looks forward to the dress she will one day wear at the cotillion, Cynthia imagines her life as a mathematics professor at the local university and Addie Mae envisions a life as a professional baseball player. The realities of the segregated political climate that will put a stop to these dreams swirl around them and eventually culminate in the fateful events of September 15, 1963.

This searing drama dares to examine what it's like to be a child in the most extreme circumstances.

(Taken from www.christinaham.com.)

A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE PLAY AND ITS HISTORY

“What bothers me most is that their names have been virtually erased. They are inevitably referred to as “the four black girls”

—Angela Davis from Four Little Girls: Birmingham 1963


The play went on to be directed by Tony Award winning actress Phylicia Rashad and performed in front of a sold-out audience at the Kennedy Center to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. It was simultaneously presented/and or produced in 47 states across the country on the same day with former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and former Attorney General Eric Holder conducting the post-show discussion in Birmingham in addition to streaming worldwide.
POINTS OF DISCUSSION

The ideas and questions in this section are designed as a springboard for student discussion after attending the play.

BIG IDEAS

Civil Rights Movement
Jim Crow Laws
Segregation
Dreams and Aspirations

WHO? WHAT? WHERE? WHEN?

1. What was the only other set piece in the play besides the chairs? (the piano)
2. Who wants to be a doctor? (Denise)
3. Where did the African American teens go in Birmingham for malts and shakes? (Pythian Temple)
4. When was the last man responsible for the bombing sent to jail? (2002)

WHY?

1. The four girls in the play talk often about what they want to do when they grow up. We often refer to these conversations as our dreams or aspirations. What does it mean to have a dream for your life? Do you think dreams are important? Why or why not? Do you have a dream or dreams for your own life? Your family? Your community? Are they these dreams?

2. Life for those living in Birmingham, Alabama was very different in 1963 than what our lives and society are like today. Compare and contrast the ways in which life has changed for African Americans since 1963. Are there similarities in today’s world that are reflective of life for African Americans in 1963? What are these similarities? Do you think actions can be taken to change those things today? What actions? How? Why?

Investigators at the 16th Street Baptist Church after it was bombed on September, 15, 1963.
ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Below are ideas inspired by the play as a jumping off point for cross-curriculum and interdisciplinary study in your classroom. From research, writing, discussion or analysis the play can be used to reach any number of educational goals.

Below are a few suggestions for curriculum incorporating Four Little Girls: Birmingham 1963 into your classroom studies.

Please also refer to the ADDITIONAL RESOURCE section at the end of this guide for links and resources to more curriculum ideas and lesson plans.

BEFORE THE PLAY

HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS: THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

INTRODUCTION TO THE 16th STREET BAPTIST CHURCH BOMBING

Adjusting for students’ age, you may want to introduce the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church using any of the following points:

- On Sunday, September 15, 1963 white terrorists, members of the Ku Klux Klan, planted a dynamite bomb at the church, set to explode as people gathered for Sunday worship. Dozens were seriously injured, and four girls were killed:
  - Denise McNair, age 11
  - Cynthia Wesley, age 14
  - Addie Mae Collins, age 14
  - Carole Robertson, age 14
- Sixteenth Street Baptist Church had been a gathering place for African American adults and children in May 1963, as they prepared to march to demand changes in the harsh laws that prohibited whites and blacks from being together. These desegregation laws were known as “Jim Crow” laws.
- For about 2 decades, so many Black homes and churches had been bombed that Birmingham was referred to as “Bombingham.” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, called Birmingham “probably the most segregated city in America.”
- Timing of the bombing: September 15, 1963, the day of the blast, was just a few days after the first African American students enrolled in formerly allwhite (segregated) schools in Birmingham, under order of the Federal government. The girls were killed just 4 months after the Children’s March in Birmingham (May 1963) and barely 3 weeks after the March on Washington (August 28, 1963) when Dr. King delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech. Whites were fearful of the change that was coming.
- Finally in the 1970, 2001, and 2002, 3 men were convicted of this bombing.
- Across the country in 1963, people were outraged by the loss of these young lives. Today, many historians contend that the church bombing along with other events in Birmingham in 1963 was pivotal in helping the nation to focus on the need to protect the rights of all its citizens, leading to passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964.
LESSON PLANS ON THE WEB:

This lesson plan was developed in 2013 in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. It combines eye-witness accounts from adults who were children in Birmingham at the time of the bombing. It is a fascinating perspective for your students.

2)  This is the link to the eyewitness accounts: http://kidsinbirmingham1963.org/

TIPS ON USING THE SITE - kidsinbirmingham1963.org:

- Study the site’s 1963 Timeline for a quick glance at the events – in Birmingham and elsewhere – that allowed the civil rights movement to usher in the end of Jim Crow laws.
- Read the stories and consider how your students might relate to the storytellers – young people in the midst of tremendous violence and social change for good.
- Use the lesson here to commemorate the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, which took place on September 15, 1963.
- Help students consider questions to pose to the storytellers – and then have them “interview” a storyteller by sending an e-mail to KidsInBirmingham1963@gmail.com. (Responses are not guaranteed – but should arrive within about 2 weeks.)

LINKS ON THE SITE to other lesson plans developed by teachers all over the country:


OTHER LINKS:


CIVIL RIGHTS ERA MUSIC

Music plays an important role in the play, Four Little Girls: Birmingham, 1963. The music used in the play is the same music used and inspired during the Civil Rights era. It was an important aspect of the movement.

Below are several links to comprehensive lesson plans about this music for Grades 4-8:

- http://lessonplanspage.com/ssmusicblackhistorycivilrightsfreedomridersweshallovercome58-htm/
SEEING THE PLAY

EXPECTATIONS

BEFORE THE PLAY: Prep the students by going over the historical events that the play is based on. Give them some historical context to view the play. What actions or events might be seen on stage? What characters might the play include from the events? What might be omitted in order for the events to be presented in a dramatic production? Students may keep a journal of their expectations. See lessons and links above to facilitate discussion about the historical context of the play.

AFTER THE PLAY: Revisit the expectations to see how many were realized and how much more the students understand the history and events portrayed in the play. Discuss the similarities and differences from what the students thought they would see on stage and what they saw in terms of plot, characters, and action. Were the characters as portrayed on the stage what you thought you would see from the historical knowledge you had on the event? How or why? How would you describe the main “message” of the play? How was it similar or different from what you originally thought?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS PRIOR TO SEEING THE SHOW:

Four Little Girls is a play about an event that took place during the Civil Rights Movement, when African American people were fighting for their rights as U.S. citizens. Using the questions below try to unlock what your students know about what life was like for African Americans before the Civil Rights Movement.

- What sorts of things were illegal for African Americans?
- What sorts of things were whites only allowed to do?
- What challenges faced African Americans?

African Americans were protesting segregation in Birmingham, Alabama. Segregation meant that black people were not allowed to do the same things as white people. For example, all African American children had to attend one school, while the other white children attended a separate school. Encourage discussion with your students to connect this historical experience with their own lives. Ask them to think of a book or story in which someone wasn’t allowed to do something that another person was.

- How did the person or character feel when they were not included?
- What did they do about it?
- Were they able to change their situation?

Before seeing the play, encourage the students to predict what they think might have happened with the characters in real life before and after the bombing:

- What do you think happened after the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist church?
- What actions did the community, city, and country take?
- What do you think the lives of the four little girls were really like?
- What did they do every day? What did they care about?
- What did they have in common? How could they have been different from each other?
AFTER THE PLAY

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In what ways were the four little girls similar to people you know today? In what ways were they different?
- Who did you relate to most: Denise, Cynthia, Carole, or Addie Mae? Why?
- What emotions or memories did the production bring up for you?
- Did this play remind you of any other book you've read? How about other events from history? What moment or aspect of the production specifically reminded you of the book or historic event?

- Why was Carole Robertson's neighborhood called Dynamite Hill?
- Why did her family continue to live there?
- What factors led to the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church?
- Why was there so much violence in Birmingham?
- What exactly does Denise McNair’s father mean when he says, “I only spend my money where I am treated with respect?”

- What do you think was the playwright’s purpose in writing this piece? What did she want you to think about? What did she hope you would feel? Why do you think so?

- Why do we create plays about events from the past, especially when those events are sometimes tragic? What role does art play in remembering the past?

The 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham marks the 50th anniversary of the bombing that killed Denise, Cynthia, Carole and Addie Mae.
POST-SHOW ACTIVITIES

LIKE IT OR NOT? WRITE A REVIEW OF THE PLAY

In this exercise students will write a review to clearly express their personal opinion about *Four Little Girls: Birmingham, 1963*

**Students will:**
- Understand that the purpose of a review is to help readers decide if they should go see a particular play or not;
- Explore how to express personal opinion in an effective, informative and enjoyable way;
- Learn to back up their opinion with facts and details while also not giving away the play’s whole story.

**THEATRE REVIEW LINKS:**
- [http://www.howwastheshow.com/](http://www.howwastheshow.com/)

(The reviews available on these links change daily. Please review the links and plays being reviewed for appropriateness for your students.)

**LESSON PLAN**

1. Using the links above for reference, ask students to bring in theatre reviews or print out your own handpicked reviews found on these links.
2. Using the professional reviews as a jumping off point, discuss the purpose of a theatre review and the elements of an informative and well-written review. Remind students that a review is a type of persuasive writing that includes an opinion supported by facts and details. Have students analyze the professional reviews and find examples of these elements.
3. Define and review literary terms that are potentially useful such as plot, characters, setting, and theme.
4. Discuss elements students may want to examine while experiencing the play, such as credible acting, supporting musical composition, design elements and effective directing/staging.
5. After seeing the play, instruct students to write a three to five-paragraph review of *Four Little Girls: Birmingham, 1963*. This may be done as an in-class assignment or assigned as homework.

**Possible Extensions**

1. Publish the reviews in the school newspaper.
2. Diagram the elements reviewed by various students.
FEELING AS PERSON – A POETRY EXERCISE

The play reveals a lot of the individual personalities of the four main characters: Denise, Cynthia, Carole or Addie Mae. These four girls each had distinct character traits and personal feelings about the world. Each also had their own dreams and aspirations for the future. This is an opportunity to have students explore personal feelings, dreams and aspirations that make up the person they are. Have students choose one of these feelings that may have come up for them while watching the play or one they saw one of the four main characters express. Then, have them fill in the blanks of the following sentences as if the feeling were a person.

1. I am_____
2. I dress in_____
3. I need ______
4. I am related to___
5. I vacation___
6. My job is___
7. I desire_____

After the students complete the sentences, have them use their answers to write a poem. For example:

I am loneliness.
The dark of night is my cloak.
I vacation in the arms of solitude.
Sadness and depression are the cousins I would joyfully disinherit.
I long for a welcoming smile.

LINKS TO LESSON PLANS ON “I AM” Poems:

- [http://alex.state.al.us/lesson_view.php?id=12128](http://alex.state.al.us/lesson_view.php?id=12128)
BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Please review all links below before sharing with students.

http://civilrightsmuseum.org/learn/educators/ - further resources for teaching civil rights from the National Civil Rights Museum.
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/lessons_plans/the-50th-anniversary-of-the-march-on-washington-lesson-plan-a-time-for-change/ - Lesson plan about the civil rights movement
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/tguide/middle.html - A set of comprehensive lesson plans for different grades teaching about the civil rights movement and era.
http://www.bcri.org/index.html - Birmingham Civil Rights Institute

FURTHER READING

BOOKS ABOUT THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT/ERA

UPPER ELEMENTARY FICTION

- Mama's Window by Lynn Rubright
- Mississippi Bridge by Mildred D. Taylor
- Scraps of Time, 1960 by Patricia C. McKissack
- The Watsons Go To Birmingham by Christopher Paul Curtis
- Ruth and the Green Book by Calvin A. Ramsay & Floyd Cooper

UPPER ELEMENTARY NONFICTION

- Voice of Freedom Fanny Lou Hamer by Carole Boston Weatherford & Ekua Holmes
- Boycott Blues: How Rosa Parks Inspired a Nation by Andrea Davis Pinkney & Brian Pinkney
- Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez by Kathleen Krull & Yuyi Morales
- John Lewis in the Lead: A Story of the Civil Rights Movement by James Haskins & Kathleen Benson
- Let It Shine: Stories of Black Women Freedom Fighters by Andrea Davis Pinkney, & Stephen Alcorn
- Nobody Gonna Turn Me Around: Stories and Songs of the Civil Rights Movement by Doreen Rappaport and Shane W. Evans
- The School is Not White! A True Story of the Civil Rights Movement by Doreen Rappaport & Curtis James
- Selma, Lord, Selma: Girlhood Memories of the Civil Rights Days by Sheyann Webb, Rachel West Nelson and Frank Sikora
- *We are a Ship: The Story of Negrow League Baseball* by Kadir Nelson
- *Malcom X* by Gail Fay
- *We Are One: The Story of Bayard Rustin* by Larry Dane Brimmer

**MIDDLE SCHOOL FICTION**
- *Freedom Songs* by Yvette Moore
- *My Mother the Cheerleader* by Robert Sharenow
- *One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams-Garcia
- *A Thousand Never Evers* by Shana Burg
- *The Rock and the River* by Kekla Magoon
- *Revolution* by Deborah Wiles
- *The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano* by Sonia Manzano
- *Stella by Starlight* by Sharon M. Draper
- *Sylvia & Aki* by Winifred Conkling

**MIDDLE SCHOOL NONFICTION**
- *Darkroom* by Lila Quintero Weaver
- *Coming of Age in Mississippi* by Anne Moody
- *Bayard Rustin: Behind the Scenes of the Civil Rights Movement* by Jim Haskins
- *I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin’s Life in Letters* by Bayard Rustin & Michael G. Long
- *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case* by Chris Crowe
- *Silver Rights* by Constance Curry
- *Voices of the People’s History of the United States* by Howard Zinn & Anthony Arnove
- *A People’s History of Sports in the United States* by Dave Zirin
- *A Time to Break Silence: The Essential Works of Martin Luther King Jr. for Students* by Martin Luther King, Jr.
- *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950’s Through the 1980’s* by Henry Hampton, Sarah Flynn & Steve Fayer
- *The John Carlos Story* by John Carlos & David Zirin
- *SNCC The New Abolitionists* by Howard Zinn
- *March, Book One* by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin & Nate Powell
- *The Radical King* by Martin Luther King, Jr, Edited by Cornel West
- *To Write in the Light of Freedom: The Newspapers of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Schools* by William Sturkey & Jon N. Hale
- *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible* by Charles E. Cobb, Jr.
- *Ella Baker & the Black Freedom Movement* by Barbara Ransby
- *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* by Jeanne Theoharis
- *Because They Marched* by Russell Freedman
- *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women of the SNCC* by Faith S. Holsaert, Martha Prescod Norman Noonan & Judy Richardson (Editors)