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ENGL 112B

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1. Author Information/Biography

<http://stevesheinkin.com/>

Before a writer, Steve Sheinkin worked as an editor for history textbooks— editing texts for clarifications and checking historical facts. Upon checking historical facts, Sheinkin collected many individual stories that he could not include in his edits; thus, he became a writer to tell untold stories in history.

2. Summary

In a strictly segregated base where Black men worked and White men ordered, Port Chicago bursts into flames and explodes from inept handling of ammunition and explosives. After many deaths and injuries, 200 Black sailors refused to work unless conditions were reevaluated. The Navy thought otherwise; they labeled their refusal as mutiny and threatened death as punishment. However, the Navy promised light punishments, if the men went back to work immediately. Many acquiesced, 50 stood steadfast.

3. Significant Quotes

- “Both civilian and military leaders hid behind the same argument. Segregation was a fact of life, they said, and trying to force a change would upset White communities and White soldiers” (46).

This quote establishes the ultimate problem of *The Port Chicago 50*. These socially rooted discriminatory constructs and beliefs dominated the era of World War II in America and caused suffering and frustration for Blacks in America. More importantly, these beliefs were deeply rooted, as segregation was a “fact” of life rather than a “way” of life. These beliefs would cause significant injustice towards the main characters of *The Port Chicago 50*. They would stand against these beliefs and prove that segregation is not a “fact” of life, but a “way” of life that needed change. And, although this argument dissipated since World War II, this argument unfortunately still resides in contemporary time. Not necessarily an argument anymore, but the argument appears through more discreet shapes and forms. Many colored American citizens face injustice from stubborn “facts” of life. Many colored American citizens now are standing against injustice to disprove any discriminatory “facts” of life.

- “The real problem, insisted many of the officers, was the black sailors. ‘The consensus of opinion of the witnesses,’ summarized the official report, ‘is that the colored enlisted personnel are neither temperamentally nor intellectually capable of handling high explosives’” (71).

Before and during the handling of explosives and ammunition, none of the Black sailors working had proper training nor proper guidance in handling high explosives. This quote displays the deeply rooted discriminatory belief involved in segregation at this time; White officers quickly scapegoat Black sailors through arrogance and ignorance. But, is this racial profiling and generalization not also a main problem in contemporary times? In contemporary

times, this quote is easily labeled absurd; however, the quote also brings familiarity at some extent. Racial profiling still remains, yet once again it appears in different shapes and forms.

- “Small asked Alex what it was that had caused him to change his mind about befriending a black man. ‘I found out something,’ the big redhead said to Small. ‘A man is a man.’” (158).

Throughout *Port Chicago 50*, White officers and civil leaders always created a complex justification or argument over maintaining segregation within America. Although deeply rooted in America at the time, Alex’s shared realization with Small indicates a small progressive change. But no matter how small the change, it is significant; it is the resolution that 50 Black sailors had fought for. More importantly, in contrast to the complex arguments given by White officers and civil leaders, Alex’s realization is simpler yet stronger than those arguments. “A man is a man,” he says, which should be a staple understanding.

4. Plans on Teaching

As of 2020, plenty of civil rights movements and political demands for justice are easily accessible and mainstreamed through technology. In a teaching environment that covers civil right movements, *The Port Chicago 50* can prove useful to young adults. Even during this contemporary time, *The Port Chicago 50* is an early form of civil rights movement, but it shows relevance towards contemporary problems regarding racial issues. Among many other books, the importance of identifying racial injustice and finding familiarity with it helps to prepare young adults about possible future racial injustices that they may encounter. More importantly, *The*

Port Chicago 50 implements solutions to these problems that young adults may take inspiration from.

In a classroom setting, the themes from *The Port Chicago 50* could be introduced alongside other historic events and novels dealing with racial discrimination— *Brown v. Board of Education*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, etc. As all these events are associated with “Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Desisions” in *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning*, students can then find familiarity and relevance by looking into contemporary movements via social networks. They can compare and contrast the problems of the old to the problems of the new, they can see what hasn’t changed and what has changed, and they can have an idea on what to expect and how to deal with injustices from observing leaders and characters of the past. With this, not only can they write about their discoveries from their comparing, but they can share personal experiences and perspectives with other students. Discussions about comparisons of injustice from the past and the present would create a community among the students and expose different perspectives to others. It would create an understanding of the world around them and an understanding of the community around them.

Fortunately, the level of the book is not too difficult. Middle grade students can sufficiently read and understand the plot, theme, and resolution that *The Port Chicago 50* offers. Also, that age group in particular often begins learning and experiencing discriminatory events via in person or on the internet. Therefore, it is important to expose middle grade students to realistic events regarding racial discrimination to prepare them for what may happen and what they will see in their own lives. Nevertheless, *The Port Chicago 50* is still impactful and significant in regards to civil rights; thus, the novel can be applied to higher education as well.

5. Text Complexity

According to Lexile and ATOS, *The Port Chicago 50* is placed approximately 1010L - 1200L and an ATOS level of 8.9. In regards to quantitative considerations, *The Port Chicago 50* is not difficult nor is it easy; the frequency of words are commonly used in life, and the word length of most words are either familiar or lenient to read out. However, the high level calculated from both Lexile and ATOS deals with the sentence length. *The Port Chicago 50* contains a mix of short and long sentences in both narration and dialogue. The narration, especially, often implements long sentences in order to link two events to one another. As the main characters experience traumatizing or discriminatory events, the narration links similar events under the theme of injustice.

For qualitative complexity, the language of *The Port Chicago 50* contains moments of slang, derogatory slang, and words with varying connotations based on context; the choice of language establishes a clear separation of respect between White commanding officers and Black working sailors. Oftentimes, if White officers praise Black sailors, the connotation and context indicates condescending and egocentric tones that may be missed which adds complexity. Although *The Port Chicago 50* does not demand a high academic reading level, it still requires a basic and fundamental understanding of connotations— how a word can mean something else entirely away from its definition.

For “reader-task” considerations, *The Port Chicago 50* definitely relates to contemporary political movements found easily through news media and social media. In today’s common events of systematic racism and authoritative brutality, students may find themselves frustrated and confused on why these injustices are not resolved correctly. *The Port Chicago 50* may offer not an answer but a suggestion on how to act upon such questions. However for certain, *The Port*

Chicago 50 has a high chance of matching life experiences with many students who are of different cultures and colors. And, in a school with a high diversity of cultures and color, this book may prove useful in preparing young adults for unjust events. Therefore, if implemented within a teaching unit, students will find interest and motivation to continue reading and discussing *The Port Chicago 50*— especially since this historic civil right act is rarely known.