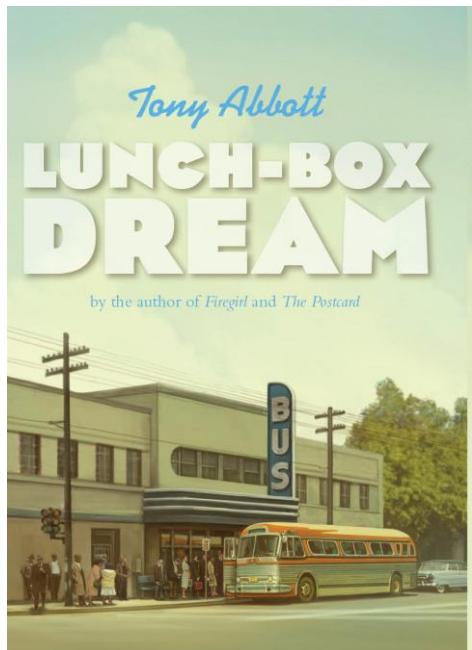


## A Classroom Discussion Guide to

# LUNCH-BOX DREAM

by Tony Abbott



**“With every narrative turn, Tony Abbott brings these never-before-seen perspectives into view in this moving civil rights kaleidoscope. Untold. Unforgettable.” —Rita Williams-Garcia, author of One Crazy Summer, winner of a Newbery Honor Award and the Coretta Scott King Award**

**“Set in the summer of 1959, Abbott’s sophisticated novel explores racial and family tensions, as well as death . . . Beautifully crafted and written.” —Publishers Weekly (starred)**

**“An intense, complex drama of political history and personal conflict, and readers will want to talk about the characters’ changing viewpoints, especially Bobby’s, as he witnesses the realities of Jim Crow laws and wakes up to his own racism.” — Booklist**

**“This tale, based in part on Abbott’s memories of a childhood road trip, could fuel avid classroom discussion or quiet personal reflection.” —Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books**

**“Abbott’s true-to-life descriptions and complicated story lines set in the volatile, pre-Civil Rights era will leave readers with much to think about and discuss when considering race relations in our country’s history.” — School Library Journal**

**“The book presents a carefully crafted portrayal of family and race relations, with a good dose of economic themes related to racial discrimination in the market and income inequality. The writing is subtle and will appeal to readers who can read between the lines and make connections that are not immediately obvious.” —Rutgers University Project on Economics and Children**

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## Introduction

Set in 1959, *Lunch-Box Dream* is the story of one family's road trip from Cleveland to Florida in Grandma's Chrysler automobile. For readers, it is a chance to explore history—two periods of United States history. As Bobby and his family travel south, we learn what American life was like in the middle of the twentieth century, but with stops along the way at Civil War battlefields, we also learn much about *that* defining era, one hundred years earlier. In alternating chapters, we also meet the Thomases—an African American family living in Atlanta and Dalton, Georgia. As the novel progresses, the two stories come together. And both families are changed. Your students will be, too.

In his remarks at the dedication of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C., in October 2011, President Barack Obama noted that during MLK's era—the civil rights era—laws changed, and so did hearts and minds. Reading historical fiction allows your students to view events and history in an immediate and personal way. *Lunch-Box Dream* will touch *their* hearts and minds—and help them understand a part of American history and its continuing importance and relevance in their lives.

This guide offers you ways to enrich the reading experience of *Lunch-Box Dream* and to connect the novel to a range of curricular areas: language arts, writing, oral communication, literature, social studies, history, and geography.

## Discussions and Activities

### Literature/Oral Performance

Tony Abbott begins *Lunch-Box Dream* with a poem by Langston Hughes:

#### **Lunch in a Jim Crow Car**

Get out the lunch-box of your dreams.  
Bite into the sandwich of your heart,  
And ride the Jim Crow car until it screams  
Then—like an atom bomb—it bursts apart.

Talk about the ideas introduced in the four lines:

- The system of racism known as “Jim Crow”
- Traveling on trains
- Dreams of a better life
- Disappointments

All of these ideas are present in the novel. Ask students to keep a list of the events in the novel that explore these ideas.

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This is also a great opportunity to introduce the class to the works of Langston Hughes—simple and often profound poems that will help them understand the perspectives of the African American characters in the novel. In many of his poems, Hughes explored the idea of holding on to hope for a better life. Have students find other poems by Langston Hughes, and ask each child to select a favorite to recite to the class. Then have each student talk about what the poem means to him or her and why he or she chose it.

### Social Studies/History/Research/Oral History/Speech And Communication

- *Lunch-Box Dream* offers glimpses into some of the small, everyday aspects of life in America in 1959.

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In a restaurant at one of their stops, Bobby “wasn’t at all hungry, but his mother told him to eat, so he ordered the Sputnik Special.”

[Page 123]

Cora has to call her family in Atlanta and goes to the store to use the phone. “I held the telephone to my ear while he looked at the numbers on the paper and pushed his finger around the dial.”

*Sputnik*? What’s that? A telephone with a dial? Have any of your students ever seen one?

As your students read *Lunch-Box Dream*, ask them to find other references to outdated cultural or technological realities of the 1950s.

- Divide your class into four groups to research aspects of life in the United States in 1959.

One group should focus on fashion and style. What did cars look like that year? What did people wear (from hairdos to shoes)?

A second group should look at current events and government leaders. What were the major news-making stories of that year? Who was president?

The third group should examine movies and television. What were the most popular TV series? Which movies scored highest at the box office? Who were the major celebrities?

The fourth group should examine books and music.

The following Web sites will be useful starting places:

<http://www.thepeoplehistory.com/1959.html>

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<http://www.imdb.com/year/1959/>

<http://kclibrary.lonestar.edu/decade50.html>

<http://www.348-409.com/1959flash.html>

- Take the research a step further. People who were about your students' ages in 1959 are in their sixties now. Each group should interview neighbors, family, and community leaders who recall that year and can provide primary source information to them. Many will have photographs and other souvenirs of that time.

Give each group time to put a presentation together, and then hold a “This is 1959” day in your classroom. Each presentation should include visuals—posters, charts, videos, slide shows. Kids should really get into the spirit and dress in clothes from that time period. You might serve a few foods/snacks that were popular in the 1950s.

- Have the class research the cost of living in 1959. What were the average prices of everyday items? Include: gasoline, a candy bar, a loaf of bread, an ice-cream cone, milk, a first-class postage stamp. They should research at least twenty items. Using the Web sites above, students can enter results in the chart below.

## **Comparing the Cost of Living in 1959 with Today (in dollars and cents)**

## Social Studies

In many ways, *Lunch-Box Dream* is about Jim Crow life in the United States. Tony Abbott offers a good explanation of what this means in his author's note (pages 175–177). Have your students read those pages carefully, and open a discussion of the Jim Crow practices they saw in the novel. Ask the class to talk about “the rules,” and how they made people behave.

Jim Crow is a phrase associated with the South, but many northern states kept the races separate in more subtle ways.

The following questions will help you focus this discussion.

[Page 7]

*They called them chocolate men.*

- The neighborhood in Cleveland where Bobby and Ricky live is not integrated. The boys didn't see black people “except once or twice a week,” when the sanitation men came to pick up the garbage. It is from living in separate—segregated—communities that their ignorance grew. Have your class discuss how prejudice can follow ignorance. If Bobby had known any African Americans, do they think he would call them “chocolate men”? What other attitudes, perceptions, and fears do your students see in not only Bobby’s behavior, but also in that of his brother, mother, and grandmother? Have the class identify specific events in the novel that show these feelings and viewpoints. How do they think living in an integrated community might change this?

[Page 38]

Cora Baker says: *Don’t look at a white person the wrong way or any way.*

- Cora is fifteen and has grown up in Georgia, where segregation was the law in 1959. Black Americans went to separate schools, had to sit in the back of public buses or wait for an all-black bus, and used separate drinking fountains and bathrooms. How did being segregated from whites affect black Americans? Ask your class to talk about events in the novel that show the feelings and viewpoints of the Thomas family, including the Bakers and the Vanns.

[Page 53]

*Another time a man stole my jacket in the train station. . . I saw [the] man swipe it off the seat and run off outside. He was a white man. . . When I got home . . . Weeza took my hands into her lap and pulled my head down on her breast and held it there while I cried.*

- Hershel feels powerless. If he runs after the thief, he’ll miss his train, and “Negroes didn’t want to be in that town at nighttime.” In addition, under Jim Crow laws, a black person would be justified in fearing a public confrontation with a white person, even one who had stolen from him. Have your students find other examples of discrimination in *Lunch-Box Dream* that show the realities of Jim Crow life.

## Geography

[Pages 11 and 13]

Bobby and Ricky's mother tells them: "*We're going to drive Grandma home to Florida. . . And on the way, we're going to stop at battlefields. The Civil War battlefields in Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia.*"

Marion prepared for the drive with a TripTik from AAA—the Automobile Association of America. Today, most families would rely on a GPS to create their route. Provide each student with a map of the United States and ask them to plot out a trip so the family could visit Civil War landmarks and other interesting historical sites along the way. Then ask them to create a route for a trip they'd like their own family to take—a trip that begins in their hometown and takes them to a destination of their choosing, with stops at national parks, historic monuments, and cultural centers.

You can print out a map of the U.S. with interstate highways included from:

[www.onlineatlas.us/interstate-highways.htm](http://www.onlineatlas.us/interstate-highways.htm)

## History

[Pages 40–41]

"*'Gilead,'*" he said, reading the sign. "*Mount Gilead.*"

"*So?*" said Bobby.

"*Mount Gilead. . . And Cardington and Ashley. We're passing through them all. . . The Lincoln train passed through every one of these towns.*"

*Bobby had heard of the Lincoln train.*

- Like Bobby, many of your students have heard of the Lincoln funeral train, but take this opportunity to study this event and its impact on our nation.

Web sites offer photographs, maps, schedules, and even daily accounts of the journey Lincoln's funeral train took from Washington to Illinois. Begin with the Web sites noted here, check for others, and look at some of the books available for children on the subject.

<http://rogerjnorton.com/Lincoln51.html>

[http://www.palincoln.org/lincoln\\_in\\_pa/lincolns\\_funeral\\_train.dot](http://www.palincoln.org/lincoln_in_pa/lincolns_funeral_train.dot)

After the class has studied the journey, have each student pick a stop on the route or a town the train passed through. Each student should write an article for that town's newspaper about the event. Encourage creativity: your students should name their

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newspaper and create its identifying masthead. Some might write editorials; others can create political cartoons; and some can write news reports.

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*Perryville [KY] was twenty-five miles off the TripTik route. . . Ricky . . . perched forward in his seat, casting looks out every window until he spied the sign—PERRYVILLE BATTLEFIELD.*

- Your students can take virtual tours of many Civil War battlefields on the Internet. A great site that offers photographs, information, and maps and makes the various battlefield sites accessible by name, year, and state is:

<http://www.civilwar.org/battlefields/>

Send your students armchair traveling, and ask them to imagine themselves as soldiers, like Bobby does when the family visits Lookout Mountain (page 96). Each student can pick a battlefield mentioned in the book or one listed on the site. Have them write a diary entry describing where they are and what the landscape is like. They should also note how they imagine the soldier feels. Students can create backstories for their soldiers: Where did he come from? Why did he enlist? How old is he? You might mention to the girls that a few women dressed as men in order to join the Army.

## Literature

Tony Abbott explores several universal themes in *Lunch-Box Dream*—ideas that go beyond time, situation, and place.

### Family

- The cast of characters listed at the start of the novel is divided into three locations, but lists two family groups. Bobby and Ricky's father is not included. Neither is Jacob's birth father, but his brother-in-law Hershel, whom he calls Poppa, is. Have the class talk about the family relationships in the book. How are the two families the same and how are they different? Both families are facing very difficult moments: the marital problems between Marion and her husband, and the crisis when Jacob is missing. How do the two families cope with these issues?
- Bobby and Ricky behave the way most brothers do. They get along generally, and they care about each other. Ask the class to list instances when the brothers work together and show kindness to each other. Still, being the younger sibling, Bobby is jealous of Ricky. When Bobby makes a fuss to prove that Ricky's battlefield treasure is not authentic, who is more hurt and embarrassed? Have your students discuss their own relationships with their siblings.

### **Death and Loss**

[Page 14]

Bobby's grandfather died four months before *Lunch-Box Dream* begins. *It was Bobby's first death. That was something.*

- Bobby thinks about the deaths of his grandfather, President Lincoln, and the soldiers who fell on the Civil War battlefields he visits. Why has he become obsessed with death?

He also thinks about the black family on the bus who may have lost a child. What has he learned about loss that helps him understand how they are feeling?

### **Coming-of-Age**

- Making decisions, choosing between right and wrong, being responsible, and looking after others when they need help are all parts of becoming an adult. Children and teens reach these stages in small steps. Ask each student to pick one of the young people in *Lunch-Box Dream*—Bobby, Ricky, Cora, or Jacob—and describe the small (and large) steps they take toward maturity in the course of the novel.

*This guide was created by Clifford Wohl, Educational Consultant*