

LESSON PLAN – READING *THE UNDEFEATED* (GRADES 5+)

OBJECTIVE: Introduce students to the triumph of the human spirit within the context of Black history.

CONTENT AREA: Social Studies, Language Arts

TIME ALLOTMENT: One class period (could be extended)

SKILLS: Reading and analysis, cause and effect of historical events

DESCRIPTION: *The Undeclared* is an illustrated poem written to commemorate the birth of the author's daughter and the inauguration of President Barack Obama. The book remembers unforgettable, unafraid, unbowed, famous and overlooked figures from Black history. The poem reflects the history of the United States, tracing the trauma and the triumphs of Black American experiences from enslavement to the Civil Rights Movement to Black Lives Matter. Rich illustrations add additional layers of meaning to the poem text. *The Undeclared* has been described as "A love letter to America. To Black America."

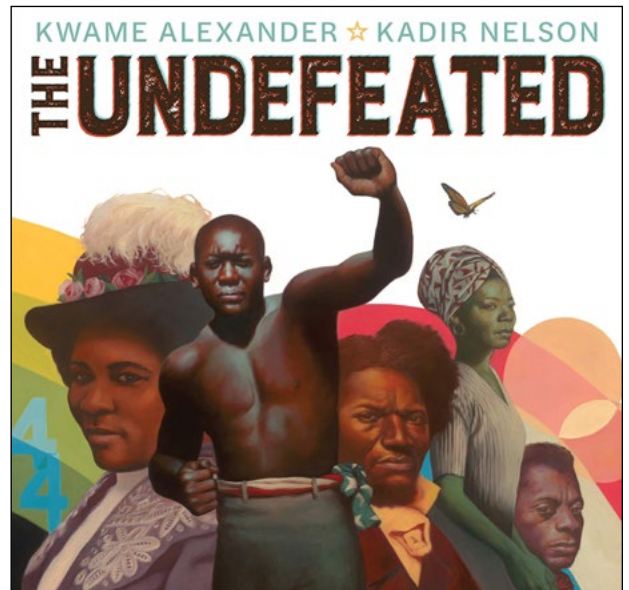


Image courtesy of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

TEACHER TIP: Great lesson plan for Black History Month.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY I

Ask students: What does it mean to persevere? After discovering what it means to persevere, have students draw a picture that embodies perseverance.

Note: Perseverance is one of three core principles promoted at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY II

To the best of their knowledge, ask students to list the Black historical figures reflected on the book cover. Encourage students to research the historical figures that are unfamiliar.

READING

Dramatically read *The Undefeated* by Kwame Alexander and Kadir Nelson (illustrator) with students. Alternatively, visit the website below to watch a video of Mr. Alexander's dramatic reading, courtesy of BBC Scotland:

Kwame Alexander reads from *The Undefeated* | Authors Live | BBC Scotland

<https://youtu.be/pLCLX8xW1Ik>

POST-READING ACTIVITY I

Ask students:

- » Why is Jack Johnson the standout historical figure on the cover and in the book?
- » Why do you think it is important to be more familiar with these historical figures?
- » What are your feelings about the images paired with the words of the poem?

POST-READING ACTIVITY II

Ask students to consider what prior knowledge Kwame Alexander assumes his readers have. What clues does he drop for his readers? For example, they likely recognize the phrase “Black Lives Matter,” but they may not recognize the phrase “We Real Cool” from the poem by Gwendolyn Brooks of the same name.

POST-READING ACTIVITY III

Have students curate a collection of digital and print resources to provide more information about the historical and contemporary figures referenced by Kwame Alexander and Kadir Nelson. You might also choose to gather a collection of picture book biographies featuring these historical figures. As students learn more about each historical figure, ask them to consider how their lives exemplify the descriptor(s) that Alexander has chosen for them. In addition, encourage students to draft free verse poems celebrating the perseverance of these individuals. Alternatively, students can create large portraits of these subjects and surround the portraits with text describing their lives.

POST-READING ACTIVITY IV

The blank page that follows the lines “The ones who survived America / by any means necessary / And the ones who didn’t” serves as a “moment of silence.” Later in the book, Alexander repeats the line “This is for the unspeakable” three times while the illustrations feature slave ships, the four Black girls killed in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, and four contemporary Black youth who were victims of police brutality.

Ask students: How can art (visual and written language) help us to bear witness to trauma inflicted by and on human beings? How does the book bring us through sadness and outrage, yet leave us in a place of hope?

POST-READING ACTIVITY IV

Throughout *The Undefeated*, Alexander references significant texts from Black history. These references appear in italics throughout the book. Explore the origins of these quotes with your students, considering how the lines from these poems, speeches, and songs fit into the narrative arc of the poem. These references include:

- » **Gwendolyn Brooks’ “We Real Cool”**
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/28112/we-real-cool>
- » **Langston Hughes’ “The Weary Blues”**
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47347/the-weary-blues>
- » **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s Nobel Lecture** (“The majestic shores of the promised land”)
<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/>
- » **Malcom X’s Speech at the Founding Rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity** (“by any means necessary”)
<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1964-malcolm-x-s-speech-founding-rally-organization-afro-american-unity/>

ADDITIONAL DIGITAL RESOURCES

<https://kwamealexander.com/>

<https://www.kadirnelson.com/about>

<https://www.nga.gov/audio-video/video/undefeated.html>

For more online learning resources, visit freedomcenter.org