Bad News for Outlaws: The Remarkable Life of Bass Reeves, Deputy U.S. Marshal

Written by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson

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*Bad News for Outlaws: The Remarkable Life of Bass Reeves, Deputy U.S. Marshal* tells the story of the Deputy U.S. Marshal and former slave, Bass Reeves. Before reading, students will confront stereotypes they may have about the Old West. As they read the text, students will be encouraged to make text-to-text connections on how the Old West may be portrayed in other sources. A graphic organizer paired with a discussion will highlight student connections, understandings, questions, and reactions to the text. Lastly, students will create and share obituaries, honoring Bass Reeves’ accomplishments as an active citizen and his dedication to justice and equality.

| Title of NCSS Notable Trade Book: | *Bad News for Outlaws: The Remarkable Life of Bass Reeves, Deputy U.S. Marshal*  
(2010 Notable Book)  
Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books  
ISBN: 978-0-8225-6764  
Recommended for grades: 4-6  
Time: Approximately three 30-45 minute sessions |
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<td>Book Summary:</td>
<td>This book tells the life story of Bass Reeves, a father of 11 children and former slave, who was a Deputy U.S. Marshal for over three decades in what later became the state of Oklahoma. Bass, who never learned how to read, was a highly respected and dedicated lawman who made more than 3,000 arrests during his career. Through a high-energy storyline and powerful illustrations, Bass Reeves’ actions come to life as readers learn how he broke numerous barriers, consistently stood up for justice, and was an example of the often overlooked presence of African Americans of the Old West.</td>
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| NCSS Standards: | • Culture  
• Time, Continuity, and Change  
• People, Places, and Environments  
• Individual Development and Identity  
• Power, Authority, and Governance  
• Civic Ideals and Practices |
Materials:

- Blank pieces of paper
- Art supplies as needed
- Writing utensils
- A copy of Bad News for Outlaws: The Remarkable Life of Bass Reeves by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson
- Copies of the Western words offered in the back of the book for students to use
- Newspapers with examples of obituaries

Objectives:

1. Students will examine the life of Bass Reeves and the historical context of his life.
2. Students will identify and analyze the ways in which Bass Reeves overcame adversity; made difficult choices; and lived a life of active citizenship.
3. Students will evaluate previously held ideas about the people involved in the Old West.
4. Students will synthesize ways to teach others about Bass Reeves and perhaps other diverse persons of the Old West through their writing and extension activities.

Procedures:

**Exploration/Introduction:**

1. Give students a blank piece of paper and some art supplies. Pose the question, “When you think of the ‘Wild West’ or ‘Old West’ (referring to what became the Western United States during the mid to late 19th century and early 20th century) what comes to mind? Who was present or involved in increasingly settling this area? What types of activities and work were the people doing?”

2. After encouraging some small group discussion, ask students to sketch an image depicting what they visualize when they think of the Old West. Encourage students to include people, places, the landscape, buildings, and activities that might have taken place.

3. Once students have had a chance to informally share their drawings with those at their table or area of the classroom, facilitate the class development of a list of common characteristics of their drawings. When listing student ideas on the board, encourage students to think of what might be missing in their list of common characteristics, encouraging them to consider stereotypes and the question of “Who is missing from this list?” Disrupt stereotypical ideas students might have from the media or other texts they have read that emphasize notions of “Cowboys & American Indians.”

4. Make sure that students understand that indigenous peoples already occupied this geographic region of North America and that there are multiple perspectives on the arrival of new groups of people arriving to this region. Encourage students to
| Development: | critically assess the concept of “settlers” who “settled” an area that was already occupied. |
|             | 5. Assess student understanding by having students (individually or in small groups) create a concept web listing the diverse groups of people present in shaping the Old West. |
| 1. Inform the class that today you will be reading aloud a powerful book about a man who is highly respected for his work in the “Old West”. Note how this book may help them add to, or change, their concept web about those involved in increasingly settling the Western United States. Remind students that the concept of “settlers” is controversial because indigenous peoples already occupied the land. |
| 2. Read *Bad News for Outlaws: The Remarkable Life of Bass Reeves, Deputy U.S. Marshal* aloud to students. During reading, you may need to stop to check for comprehension and ensure students understand key ideas, such as: fugitive or runaway slave; Native American refuges for escaped slaves; literacy and illiteracy; and activism. |
| 3. Encourage students to make text-to-text connections throughout the story, noting how this book about Bass Reeves connects to, or disrupts, their previously held knowledge about the Old West. |
| 4. Distribute another blank piece of paper to each student. Show students how to fold paper into four equal squares. (Draw a model on board depicting this paper.) Write one of the following prompts in each of the four squares: share a personal connection to this story; write one question that you have about this story; tell one thing that surprised you about this story; and draw a picture of an important moment in this book. (Alternatively, this graphic organizer could be pre-made and photocopied for students.) |
| 5. Provide time for students to reflect on the book and complete this graphic organizer as a response to the book. |
| 6. Use the four prompts as a starting point for discussion about the text. Encourage students to share their personal connections to the story, discuss their questions and surprises, and explain the images they created. |
| 7. Closure. Pull thoughts together to focus students’ ideas on the theme using the following questions. |
|   • What are some important moments in Bass Reeve’s life? Why? |
|   • What are all of the ways that Bass took a stand as an active citizen? |
Expansion:  

- What surprised you about Bass’ life and work?
- Why do you think Bass was so well respected?
- How does Bass’ life connect to, or disrupt, your previously-held ideas about the Old West?
- If you were to teach someone about Bass Reeves, what would you make sure to tell them?
- Why do you think the author chose to write this book?
- Would you recommend this book to others? Why or why not?

8. Assessment: Assess students’ understanding of the book based on their responses to the four prompts on the graphic organizer.

1. Tell students that they are going to pretend to be a journalist for a newspaper in Bass’ town in 1910. They, and the people in town, just found out Bass has died. Everyone is very sad. They are preparing to write a powerful obituary about his life and how important he was to the community.

2. After reviewing examples of obituaries and their key components, ask students to first, brainstorm ideas about what they want to make sure to include in the obituary.

3. Next, ask students to refer to the copies of the Western words offered in the back of the book. Encourage them to think of creative ways that they can include at least 3-4 of these words in their article.

4. As students begin writing tell them that you are going to be looking for the following in their article:
   - Demonstration of knowledge of ways Bass Reeves overcame adversity and made tough choices
   - Demonstration of understanding of the term activism through providing ways Bass Reeves supported and upheld the concept of justice for all.
   - Demonstration of comprehension of Bass Reeves’ respectability as a community leader
   - Use of at least 3-4 Western Words
   - Evidence of high quality writing free of grammatical or spelling errors

5. Ask students to share their finished writing in an Author Celebration. (An Author Celebration is a whole class gathering where each student has the opportunity to share their writing by reading it aloud to the class. This celebration offers a time for community building, a legitimate audience for student writing, and an avenue for students to give one another feedback on their writing.) Post student work on a class bulletin board for others to read following the Author
Celebration.

6. Additional ideas include:
   - Consider inviting other classes to come and listen to small groups share their writing at a larger Author Celebration.
   - Encourage students to illustrate their obituary or find primary sources that support their writing.
   - Consider having students create digital media such as: a podcast, video, or blog entry about Bass Reeves and the ways his life and efforts disrupt what we often know about the history and people of the early Western United States.

Assessment: Assess student growth and understanding of Bass Reeves’ life and work by evaluating the written obituaries. Specifically, determine if students’ writing included:
   - Ways that Bass Reeves overcame adversity and made tough choices
   - Ways that Bass Reeves acted as an active citizen
   - Reason(s) Bass Reeves was highly respected
   - Use of at least 3-4 Western Words
   - High quality writing free of grammatical or spelling errors

Suggested Extension Activities:

1. Do inquiry projects further disrupting stereotypes about the Old West. Study the work of specific African-American women, Buffalo Soldiers, African-American Cowboys, American Indians, and Latinos of the Old West. With posters, PowerPoint presentations, or using digital media, students could raise awareness about the lives and efforts of these individuals and groups of people often overlooked in our nation’s history. Students could take action as active citizens by creating a Wall of Fame, Memorial, or Showcase of these important people in our nation’s history, highlighting the diversity of the Old West.

2. Students develop and perform role plays for other classes about important events in the book, creating a memorial event for Bass Reeves (perhaps even developing a way to raise funds for the memorial that is being built in his honor in Oklahoma).

3. Students create an illustrated timeline of Reeves life and of important events offered in the back of the book.

4. Students perform inquiry projects about the geography and history of Oklahoma, making sure to learn more about American Indians who were forcefully relocated there.

Additional References
The Other Pioneers: African-Americans on the Frontier. Retrieved from [http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=4807](http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=4807)  
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