

AN EDUCATOR GUIDE TO

AMERICAN WINGS

CHICAGO'S PIONEERING BLACK AVIATORS
AND THE RACE FOR EQUALITY IN THE SKY



AWARD-WINNING AUTHORS
SHERRI L. SMITH AND ELIZABETH WEIN

“[A] BEAUTIFUL AND BRILLIANT history of not only what it means to be Black and dream of flying but to, against every odd, do so.”

—JACQUELINE WOODSON,
NATIONAL BOOK AWARD WINNER FOR *BROWN GIRL DREAMING*



“An **EXCITING** and richly rendered addition to the history of Black aviation.”

—**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY**



★ “A **VIVID** and accurate recounting.”

—**SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL**,

STARRED REVIEW

“A **FASCINATING**, well-told American story full of **COMPELLING** innovation.”

—**KIRKUS REVIEWS**

“[A] **THOROUGH AND ABSORBINGLY** written history.”

—**THE HORN BOOK**



ABOUT THE BOOK

In the years between World War I and World War II, aviation fever was everywhere, including among Black Americans. But what hope did a Black person have of learning to fly in a country constricted by prejudice and Jim Crow laws, where Black aviators like Bessie Coleman had to move to France to earn their wings?

American Wings follows a group of determined Black Americans: Cornelius Coffey and Johnny Robinson, skilled auto mechanics; Janet Harmon Bragg, a nurse; and Willa Brown, a teacher and social worker. Together, they created a flying club and built their own airfield south of Chicago. As the U.S. hurtled toward World War II, they established a school to train new pilots, teaching both Black and white students together and proving, in a time when the U.S. military was still segregated, that successful integration was possible.

Featuring rare historical photographs, *American Wings* brings to light a hidden history of pioneering Black men and women who, with grit and resilience, battled powerful odds for an equal share of the sky.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

SHERRI L. SMITH is not a pilot, but she makes an excellent passenger (unless it's a very small plane). She is the author of numerous acclaimed fiction and nonfiction books for young people, including *Flygirl*, the winner of the California Book Awards' Gold Medal; *The Blossom and the Firefly*, the winner of the Golden Kite Award from the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators; *Orleans*; and *Who Were the Tuskegee Airmen?* She teaches creative writing at Hamline University. Born in Chicago, Sherri now lives in Los Angeles. Learn more at SherriLSmith.com and follow her on Instagram @rhymeswithcapri.



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ELIZABETH WEIN is a recreational pilot and the owner of about a thousand maps. She is the author of several young adult novels, including *Code Name Verity*, an Edgar Award winner and a #1 *New York Times* bestseller; *Black Dove, White Raven*, winner of the Children's Africana Book Award; and most recently, *Stateless*. Her book *A Thousand Sisters: The Heroic Airwomen of the Soviet Union in World War II* was a finalist for YALSA's Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults Award. A dual American-British citizen, Elizabeth lives in Scotland. Learn more at ElizabethWein.com and follow her on Instagram @ewein2412.



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Credit: National Archives photo no. 208-FS-793-1



Credit: U.S. Air Force SAF, DRUs and FOAs



Credit: Eugene Jacques Bullard (U.S. Air Force Photo)

DEAR EDUCATORS.

In *American Wings*, award-winning authors Sherri L. Smith and Elizabeth Wein tell the inspiring and often overlooked story of the Black aviators who played a crucial role in the aviation industry, particularly in Chicago, during a time when racial equality was a distant dream. Educator guides, like the one accompanying *American Wings*, are intended to offer support and resources that go beyond the written word. They are tools to help educators navigate complex subjects, encourage critical thinking, and foster meaningful dialogue in the classroom.

We know school librarians and teachers continue to face challenges with book bans, particularly on titles that deal with race. This issue raises critical questions about the inclusion of such materials in curricula and instruction, prompting us to reflect on the purpose and impact of educator guides. We acknowledge the ongoing struggle to provide diverse and inclusive literature in our educational institutions. In an environment where certain titles are being challenged or banned, the commitment to fostering a comprehensive understanding of history, society, and different perspectives becomes all the more vital.

This guide is designed to help you seamlessly integrate this incredible narrative into your curriculum, providing your students with a unique perspective on history, perseverance, and the pursuit of equality. We are excited to introduce you to the Educator Guide for *American Wings: Chicago's Pioneering Black Aviators and the Race for Equality in the Sky*.

TAKE FLIGHT.

ERIKA LONG AND PENGUIN YOUNG READERS SCHOOL & LIBRARY TEAM



This guide was written by Erika Long, a certified school librarian, consultant, and library advocate. Long has spent a decade in school libraries and presenting at the local and national levels and is the owner of Not Yo Mama's Librarian, LLC. She coauthored the "Equity" chapter in *Core Values in School Librarianship: Responding with Commitment and Courage*. Connect with her on Instagram @NotYoMamasLibrarian or <https://notyomamaslibrarian.my.canva.site/>.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

RESEARCH AND PRE-READING DISCUSSION

Before taking flight with *American Wings*, research the following figures and institutions and discuss what role you think they may play in *American Wings*.

- ★ Bessie Coleman
- ★ *The Chicago Defender*
- ★ Eugene Bullard
- ★ Ethiopian Air Force
- ★ The Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute

JIGSAW

In 1921, Bessie Coleman achieved a groundbreaking milestone by becoming the first Black female pilot to secure an international pilot's license. "In fact, she was the first American of any race or gender . . ." (p. 16). In an era where opportunities for Black individuals to learn to fly were severely limited, Coleman boldly embarked on a journey to France to pursue her aviation dreams. Apply the Jigsaw Method to delve deeper into Europe's political climate and the enhanced opportunities for success among Black individuals abroad during that historical period.

THINK. PAIR. SHARE.

Watch the [video clip](#) "Inspired By Black Aviators." Use prior knowledge to compare and contrast what the pursuit of aviation looks like for Black Americans then (1920s and 1930s) and now.



Credit: Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas



Credit: From the collection of Yahoshuah Israel, author of *The Lion and the Condor*



Credit: NASA

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- 1** With the Emancipation Proclamation, Black men were again permitted to serve in the military. However, they were only allowed to serve in segregated units and, in the Navy, only employed in service roles such as stewards, cooks, and deckhands. “As for aviation, there wasn’t a chance that a Black man would be allowed to fly for the U.S. military.” How does this quote reflect the historical challenges faced by Black individuals pursuing careers in aviation? What societal and institutional barriers existed, and how did these barriers impact the aspirations and opportunities of Black aviators during that period? (pp. 8–9)
- 2** Under the guidance of its publisher, Robert S. Abbott, the *Chicago Defender* “consistently opted for the terms ‘Race’ and ‘the Race’ in its reporting.” Why would Abbott enforce the use of these terms as opposed to the color-coded words used to describe Black people during that time? What significance do these terms have in relation to Black aviators’ race to the sky? (p. 15)
- 3** Although Cornelius Coffey and Johnny Robinson were accepted to the Curtiss-Wright School of Aviation based on their merit, they weren’t allowed to enroll, as the school’s director was worried his white students “wouldn’t take kindly to sharing a classroom with African Americans.” In a deal to drop the lawsuit against the school, the director offered to let them join but warned that “the school would accept no responsibility for any racist opposition the white students might instigate.” Predict what Coffey and Johnny’s experience with their classmates might be like. (pp. 36–42)
- 4** After Akers Airport closed, the student pilots decided to search for an airfield of their own. They landed in Robbins—on the outskirts of Chicago—“one of the first ‘race’ villages of its kind in the nation.” How might this all-Black community be thriving in the face of the Great Depression? (pp. 55–56)
- 5** The Challenger Aero Club celebrated the success of becoming “the only accredited flying field owned and operated by Negroes in the United States” by paying homage to Bessie Coleman. The club was the first to do so with an airborne display over her grave. It became an annual tradition. Discuss the significance of the Chicago aviators’ tribute. (pp. 60–61)



Credit: Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas



Credit: Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas



Credit: Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas



Credit: Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas



Credit: Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES CONTINUED

- 6** Coffey and Johnny's success in the classroom as students and assistant instructors heightened their passion for aviation. Fueled by the belief that "... there was a race for equality both on land and in the air," they were determined to "connect flight training with an accredited Black educational institution" with a specific focus on partnering with Johnny's alma mater, Tuskegee Institute. However, their path was riddled with obstacles, and the men's relationship seemed to undergo strain as Tuskegee's administration opted for a cautious approach. Explore the challenges faced and resilience shown by Coffey and Johnny as they sought to integrate flight training into Tuskegee Institute. Analyze the impacts on their shared vision and potential partnership. (pp. 76, 77-85)
- 7** Explore the motivations, actions, and impact of the solidarity of Black aviators for Ethiopia during Italy's invasion under Mussolini, despite the U.S.'s Neutrality Acts. In what ways do the ideologies of Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, and Marcus Garvey influence Black Americans' support of Haile Selassie and Ethiopia? (pp. 93-118)
- 8** When Johnny returned home, he arrived in New York on the German steamship *Europa*. "The ship flew the flag of Hitler's government, an ominous black swastika against a blood-red background, a stark and ironic contrast to what the *Philadelphia Tribune* described as a freedom-loving 'small forest' of American Stars and Stripes and the red, gold, and green tricolor of Ethiopian flags being waved by an excited crowd of hundreds of people who'd gathered at the docks to welcome Johnny home." What conflicting emotions might the juxtaposition of these two sights have caused Robinson? (p. 124)
- 9** The aviators worked diligently to encourage legislators to include an anti-discrimination amendment to the Civilian Pilot Training bill. They strived to secure a place within the Civilian Pilot Training Program. When the government announced schools that would receive CPTP funding, six Black colleges were granted programs and the Coffey School of Aeronautics "was the only participating Black flight school." Coffey strove to include at least one white and at least one female student for every ten students in flight school. Why was this important? (pp. 161-199)



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES CONTINUED

- 10** “In 1940, Tuskegee won the bid for the first roll-out of advanced CPTP training . . . the only Black flight school accepted.” Why was their success so frustrating to the Chicago aviators? Consider the Jim Crow South and the U.S. military’s segregation practices to discuss how this win for Tuskegee contradicted everything the Chicago pilots worked toward. (pp. 202–215).
- 11** Discuss the significance of Chicago’s Black aviators’ involvement with the Tuskegee Airmen. (pp. 213–229)
- 12** Janet Harmon Waterford kept busy with flight instruction at the Johnson Flying Service and pursuing advanced training. She indubitably made an impression on her students, as one encouraged her to apply to the newly formed Women Airforce Service Pilots. How does the subsequent rejection shape and influence her character? (pp. 245–253)
- 13** Utilize one of the primary sources to compose a journal entry in the voice of specific pioneering Black aviators.
 - a. Photo of the Challenger Aero Club at Robbins Airfield; Photo of club members surveying the windstorm damage at Robbins (p. 67, 69)
 - b. Dale White’s National Airmen’s Association of America membership card (p. 170)
 - c. Photo of aviation mechanics class as part of the Civilian Pilot Training Program (p. 209)
 - d. Photo of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visiting the Tuskegee-based Air Corps (p. 220)
 - e. Photo of Coffey’s swearing-in for the Civil Air Patrol (p. 237)
 - f. Johnny Robinson’s Ethiopian Air Force business card (p. 261)
- 14** “But for Black Americans, it was much worse to love and bleed for a nation that did not love them back.” How does this sentiment reflect the complex relationship between Black Americans and their country, and what implications does it have on their sense of identity and belonging? (p. 259)



Credit: Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas



Credit: NASA



Credit: Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas



POST-READING ACTIVITIES

QUICK WRITE

How does Bessie Coleman’s statement, “The air is the only place free from prejudice,” resonate with the experiences of Black aviators featured in *American Wings*? In what ways did these aviators find a sense of freedom and equality in the sky, and how did their achievements challenge societal prejudices on the ground? Explore specific examples from the narrative that illustrate the transformative power of aviation in breaking through racial barriers.

JIGSAW

Use the Jigsaw Method to synthesize the narrative. Example home groups: segregation in aviation, military service of Black aviators, the role of women in aviation, legacy and long-term impact of Black aviators

INTERACTIVE/DIGITAL TIMELINE

Using Canva, Genially, or Google Drawing, create an interactive or digital timeline that highlights the challenges and accomplishments of Chicago’s pioneering Black aviators. Tech-free alternative: Flow Map

PAIRED TEXT OPTIONS/ READ-ALIKES

Born to Fly: The First Women’s Air Race Across America
by Steve Sheinkin

You Can Fly: The Tuskegee Airmen
by Carole Boston Weatherford



ALSO BY THE AUTHORS

Flygirl by Sherri L. Smith
Who Were the Tuskegee Airmen? by Sherri L. Smith
Code Name Verity by Elizabeth Wein
Black Dove, White Raven by Elizabeth Wein



COMMON CORE STANDARDS ADDRESSED IN THIS GUIDE

College and Career Readiness
Anchor Standards for Reading
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1](#)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7](#)

College and Career
Readiness Anchor Standards for
Speaking and Listening
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1](#)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2](#)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.5](#)

College and Career Readiness
Anchor Standards for Writing
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.2](#)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3](#)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.4](#)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.6](#)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.7](#)

College and Career Readiness
Anchor Standards for Language
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.1](#)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.2](#)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.5](#)
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.6](#)

