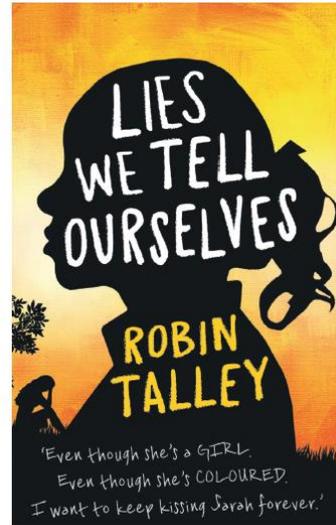


2016 Carnegie Medal shortlist reading resources

Title: **Lies We Tell Ourselves**

Author: **Robin Talley**

Publisher: Mira Ink



TALKING POINTS

Opening

“The white people are waiting for us.” What do you think of that as an opening line?

The first chapter is incredibly powerful and tense – how does the author create that sense of danger?

The author uses very offensive racial slurs in the book, the word “nigger” in particular. Do you think she’s right to use this kind of language in this context, even if it causes offense?

Then and Now

The story is set at a crucial moment in the story of American desegregation and integration – how much did you know about the history before you read the book? The Author’s Note at the back of the book gives some historical background and context to the story – does it help you to understand it?

More than fifty years have passed since the time this book is set. Why is it important to be still telling these stories?

In order to make readers understand the situation, the author has chosen to write a novel, *not* a history book. What particular power does fiction have in a story like this?

The adults

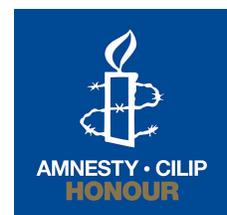
How much do the schoolkids – white and black – think for themselves, and how much do they just automatically adopt the views of their parents?

The parents take strong sides in the struggle (Sarah’s family for integration, Linda’s for segregation) but how much do they actually know about what’s happening at school, where the battle is really being fought?

The black kids are told to respect their teachers, regardless of how they are treated. How many of the teachers do you think truly *earn* their respect?



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Parallel stories

What's the benefit of having two parallel perspectives to the story?
How distinct are the two voices telling us their parts of the story?

Sarah is the first character we meet, but when we're introduced to Linda we learn that she has concerns about her life, too – how do they compare with Sarah's? (Look at her first line, compared to Sarah's.)
How are their aspirations/expectations for their lives similar, or different?

Sarah

Linda is perhaps the character whose views change the most over the course of the book – but does Sarah go on a journey, too? Do her attitudes change?

What role does religion play in Sarah's world?

Linda

How you feel about Linda's implication in the violence against Chuck? Do you think the editorial she writes afterwards is enough to redeem her?

Why does her attitude towards black people change over the course of the book? Do you think the change is believable?

And – perhaps a deceptively simple question – do you *like* Linda?

Discrimination and prejudice

Do you see parallels between the different kinds of prejudice evidenced in the book, whether based on race or sexuality? And are there parallels in the fights for tolerance in today's society?

Sarah says "I can make myself like Ennis..."; Linda wishes she could do the same with Jack. Why?

Characters

Many supporting characters have complex relationships with the two main characters. How do these three people, for example, change the way Sarah and Linda behave?

- Sarah's sister Ruth
- Linda's friend Judy (Is she also an "outsider" of sorts?)
- Linda's dad

The first we see of all the white characters they are pure nastiness and aggression – do you think all the significant characters become more rounded as we get to know them, or do some remain relatively undeveloped?



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Lies we tell ourselves

Are all the chapter-head “lies” really lies? How are the following borne out, or not, in the book?

- Lie #8: None of this had anything to do with me (Linda)
- Lie #16: I can do this alone (Sarah)
- Lie #19: There’s no use fighting (Sarah)
- Lie #22: Adults always know what’s best (Sarah)

And finally...

Did the book end the way you expected? The way you hoped?

TALKING ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights themes in this story

The right to education; equality; safety and freedom from cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment; freedom of thought and expression; women’s rights; LGBTI rights

Human rights questions

We have the right to an education, and to develop our personalities to the fullest, and we should all be treated in the same way

Why can’t Sarah enjoy her education?

What rights are the black students denied?

Can you see how this is part of a larger struggle to claim equality in all aspects of their lives?

Do you blame Linda for her beliefs in the beginning (or blame her parents, or the society that conditioned them)?

How would Linda and Sarah be treated in a UK school today?

We have the right to safety, justice and equal protection from the law, and nobody has the right to hurt us or to torture us

How does the bullying and violence that Paulie, Chuck, Sarah and others face make you feel?

Why do the teachers fail to challenge the attacks, harassment and humiliation?

Why does Sarah feel unable to talk to her parents about what’s really going at school?



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We have a duty to other people, and we should protect their rights and freedoms

Many of the characters show bravery and determination by challenging discrimination and trying to make positive change (Ruth, Mr Lewis, Mr and Mrs Dunbar...). Discuss.

The novel explores how standing up for and defending human rights is necessary but also painful and dangerous. How?

Do adults always know best?

At the end, are you surprised by the choices made not only by Sarah and Linda but by the whole community? (For instance, why does Ruth choose to stay at Jefferson despite the denial of so many of her rights?)

What do you hope life for Sarah and Linda will be like when they get to Washington?

- For a full version of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights go to www.amnesty.org.uk/udhr

For more free teaching resources from Amnesty International go to www.amnesty.org.uk/education



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