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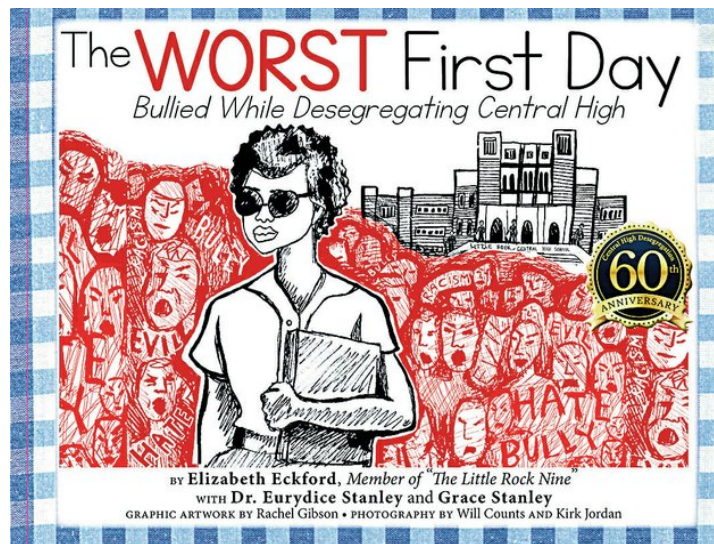
Review of *The Worst First Day: Bullied While Desegregating Central High*

Written by Elizabeth Eckford with Dr. Eurydice Stanley & Grace Stanley

Artwork by Rachel Gibson & Photography by Will Counts & Kirk Jordan

Adult/Educator Reviewer: Sharon M. Nuruddin
The University of Georgia, Athens, GA

Student Reviewers: Foxie G. Nuruddin, 6th Grade & Pharaoh N. Nuruddin, 3rd Grade



Eckford, E. (2017). *The worst first day*. Pensacola, FL: Lamp Press.
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Adult Review: Sharon M. Nuruddin

Elizabeth Eckford is a living icon. Search for her name on the Internet and you will find a photo of her that has become one of the most recognizable symbols of the civil rights movement in the history of the United States of America. In a handmade white and navy gingham dress, she bravely and solemnly walks to her first day of school— past throngs of hateful White children and adults alike—as one of the Little Rock Nine, a group of brave students who, in 1957, desegregated Central High school, in Little Rock, Arkansas.

I grew up during the 1980s in suburban Baltimore, Maryland. Both of my parents grew up in working class, predominantly African American neighborhoods in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. They graduated in the early 1960s from relatively diverse high schools, where African American, White, Asian, and Latinx students attended school together and befriended each other. Going into town on a Saturday meant shopping at local department stores and grabbing a milkshake at the lunch counters of integrated malt shops. My father was valedictorian of his high school class. The principal in my mother's high school was a Black woman with a doctorate degree. Although their parents and many of their relatives were born and raised in the Southern U.S. ("down South"), they witnessed the fight for school desegregation—and much of the civil rights movement—on television screens, and over the phone with relatives who had not migrated "up North" for job opportunities in factories and on construction sites. When I was about 13 years old, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday became a national holiday, and it was probably around then when I was first taught about the Little Rock Nine. Now I have four children of my own who attend public schools located at the foothills of Stone Mountain, Georgia, an

area once largely populated by Native Americans, then by White settlers and African slaves. Stone Mountain was also the site of the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, a fact not lost on Dr. King as he mentions it in his "I Have a Dream" speech. The area is now richly diverse, and I am grateful for people like Elizabeth Eckford and Central High's first cohort of African American students. I owe my children's quality education and the freedom they have to walk to the bus stop in peace, to them.

As a board member of the *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, I was fortunate to be present at a special plenary session during JoLLE's 2018 winter conference from Ms. Eckford, Dr. Eurydice Stanley, and her daughter Grace Stanley, as they presented their book *The Worst First Day – Bullied While Desegregating Central High*. Ms. Eckford, now 76 years old, poignantly and with earnest, recounted her story as one of the Little Rock Nine. This is the 60th anniversary of that pivotal time in U.S. history, and listening to Ms. Eckford's story brought tears to the eyes of many audience members. Reading the book is also jarring. We see Elizabeth, then a 14 year-old incoming junior, readying herself for her first day at her new school. Like many young girls her age, she was more concerned about what to wear and how to overcome her excitement, than on the verbal and physical abuse she was about to suffer at the hands of her own schoolmates. Through the talk, I learned about the extreme bullying Ms. Eckford experienced, but as a reader, I was transported back to that time through her words and the illustrations, photographs, document reproductions, and other images featured with every turn of a page.

The Worst First Day is a lesson in the enduring effects of systemic racism "passed down through the years" (p. 39) from the time when African Americans were considered property, not

people. They will read about weapons that students brought to campus with the intent to threaten and harm the Little Rock Nine. They will read about White parents who formed organizations to block the Little Rock Nine from entering the school, supported all the while by the governor himself. Eckford and her Black classmates were taunted with racial epithets, and recalling their threats of torture and lynching, Eckford reminds us of young Emmett Till, tortured and murdered at the hands of racist White men. Those labeled as sympathizers of the Little Rock Nine often found themselves ostracized by the community, with White teachers being removed from their posts. These are valuable lessons for students who might only be familiar with the sanitized version of the civil rights movement, not the gritty truth that Eckford reveals in her book.

One of the most inspiring quotes from Ms. Eckford comes from her reason for writing the book in the first place:

I feel as though I must. People are being harassed in toxic environments at school and work. They endure hateful statements from their peers with no reprieve in sight. Some people don't understand the consequences of what they say and do. I sincerely hope that by sharing my story, I can make them start recognizing the impact of their behavior. (Eckford, et al., 2017, p. xi)

The Little Rock Nine endured horrific and unspeakable treatment from White students, community members, even police officers sworn to protect them. Many years later, after being reunited with the only White students who spoke to her at the school, Ms. Eckford was able to overcome her trauma enough to share her journey in public. Audiences who attend one of Ms. Eckford's talks are advised to "clap" by waving their hands out of respect for [her]" (p.

111), as the abuse she experienced has left her with sensitivities to large crowds and loud noises. But her voice is resounding, firm, and fearless, and the book is a reflection of triumph beyond all odds, a lesson in surviving bullying of the worst kind. The book concludes with her speaking of what came after her time at Central High. She served in the Army as an Information Specialist, reporting on racial tension within the military. She also recalls other horrific events, like the 1963 Birmingham, Alabama church bombing that killed four, young Black girls, and the 1968 assassination of Dr. King. In 1999, again as a member of the Little Rock Nine, Elizabeth Eckford received a Congressional Gold medal by then-governor of Arkansas, William J. Clinton, who would later become the 42nd president of the United States.

I would recommend *The Worst First Day* for middle grade (4-8) readers, those students who read at middle grade-levels, and their parents. In language arts classes, students can discuss bullying and how to walk past the hate they might be experiencing. The illustrations can be used in social studies classes to guide discussions on the history of school segregation and desegregation in the United States, and in art classes, children might be inspired to create their own depictions of perseverance despite all odds. ESoL students can benefit from the book as it is a good introduction to civil rights issues in the U.S., and the writing is clear and easy to read. It is also a helpful reference for parents who wish to discuss racism and bullying, and civil rights with their children.

Educators should consider the fact that the book is quite extensive, and they might need to teach excerpts from the book, instead of the entire text. Some of the material might be difficult for children to process, so being prepared for challenging questions is paramount to meaningful engagement with the

book. There are also minor typographical and syntactical errors throughout that might need to be clarified, especially with English learners.

Student Review: Foxie G. Nuruddin

The Worst First Day is an important book because it informs people of how rude and cruel segregation was, and how wrong the world used to be. This book tells the story of how a young girl in high school was treated just for going to school. She was very happy to go on her first day of school, but when she got there, it wasn't as pleasant as she thought it would be. I say it wasn't pleasant because of all of the bullying. They called her names, spit on her, and other horrible things.

The positive part of this story is that after this experience, Ms. Eckford did many good things with her life, like join the military, win awards, and write this book. I would recommend this book to people who want to know about what segregation was like and how people of color in the U.S. used to live. I would also recommend this story to other people who lived during this time so they can read about her experience. The only thing I didn't like about the book was that it was kind of long.

Student Review: Pharaoh N. Nuruddin

I like the book *The Worst First Day* because it tells a lot about African American people in the 1950s. I recommend the book for anyone who wants to know what segregation was like and how mean it was. I don't like how they treated Elizabeth Eckford. She is a brave woman because when the racists were surrounding her, she was not scared. One thing I wasn't happy about was the cover. It shows a lot of mean faces, and that made me sad.