

# The Civil Rights Reader

American Literature from Jim Crow to Reconciliation

Edited by Julie Buckner Armstrong  
Amy Schmidt, Associate Editor

*Perspectives on civil rights not found in history books*



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This anthology of drama, essays, fiction, and poetry presents a thoughtful, classroom-tested selection of the best literature for learning about the long civil rights movement. Unique in its focus on creative writing, the volume also ranges beyond a familiar 1954–1968 chronology to include works from the 1890s to the present. The civil rights movement was a complex, ongoing process of defining national values such as freedom, justice, and equality. In ways that historical documents cannot, these collected writings show how Americans negotiated this process—politically, philosophically, emotionally, spiritually, and creatively.

Gathered here are works by some of the most influential writers to engage issues of race and social justice in America, including James Baldwin, Flannery O'Connor, Amiri Baraka, and Nikki Giovanni. The volume begins with works from the post-Reconstruction period when racial segregation became legally sanctioned and institutionalized. This section, titled "The Rise of Jim Crow," spans the period from Frances E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. In the second section, "The Fall of Jim Crow," Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and a chapter from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* appear alongside poems by Robert Hayden, June Jordan, and others who responded to these key figures and to the events of the time. "Reflections and Continuing Struggles," the last section, includes works by such current authors as Rita Dove, Anthony Grooms, and Patricia J. Williams. These diverse perspectives on the struggle for civil rights can promote the kinds of conversations that we, as a nation, still need to initiate.

**Julie Buckner Armstrong** is an associate professor of English at the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg. She is coeditor of *Teaching the American Civil Rights Movement: Freedom's Bittersweet Song*. **Amy Schmidt** is completing a doctoral degree in English at the University of Arkansas.

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