

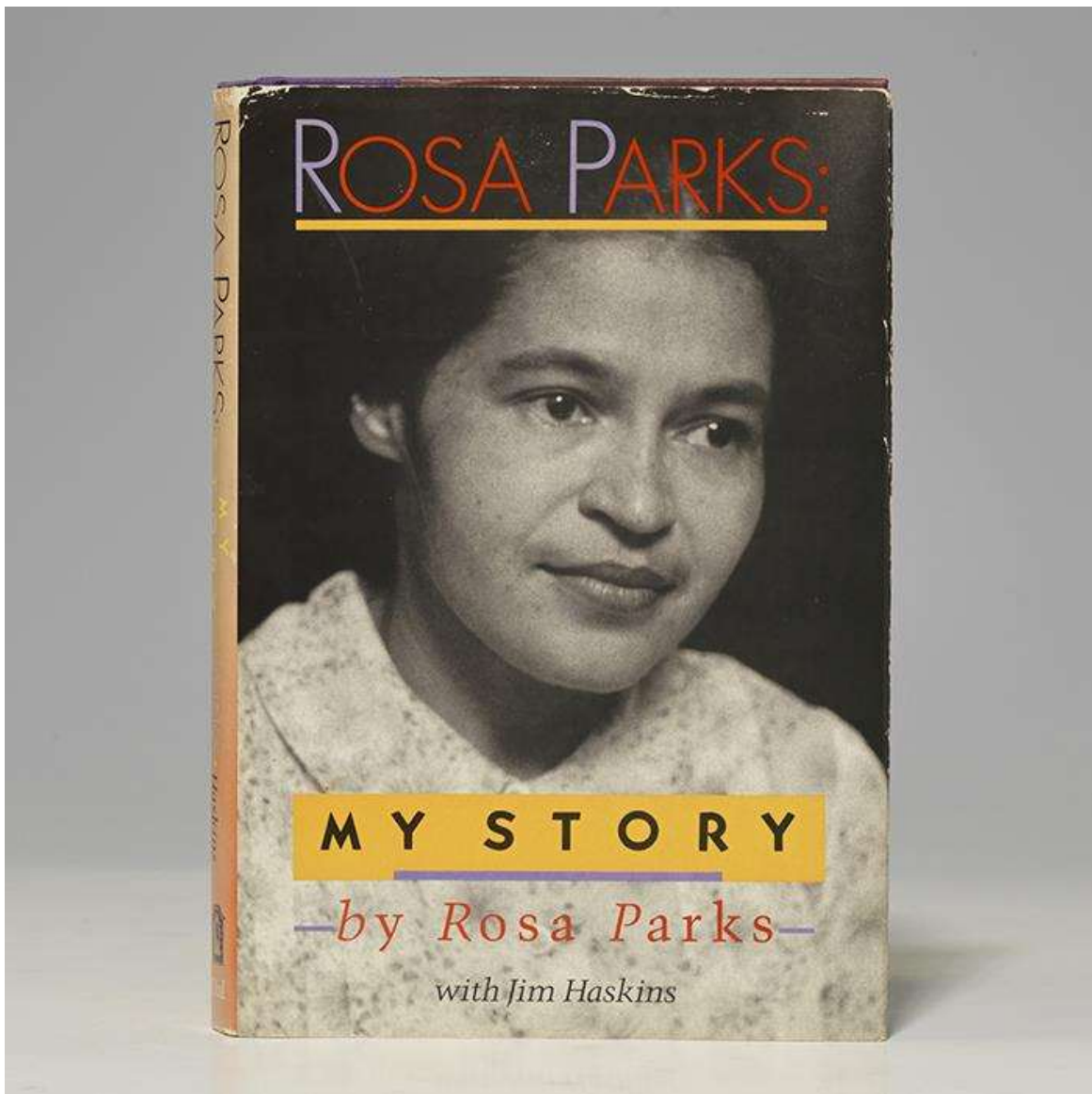
"My Story" (1992) by Rosa Parks: A Canonical Book

First edition curated by Stephen A Batman

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Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

Rosa Parks, Rosa Parks: My Story, 1992



ROSA PARKS:

MY STORY

1/17/93

Rosa Parks

SIGNED BY ROSA PARKS

First edition, second printing (same year as the first), of Parks' autobiography, signed on the half title by her in green ink and dated, "1/17/93." "Actually, no one can understand the action of Mrs. Parks unless he realizes that eventually the cup of endurance runs over, and the human personality cries out, 'I can take it no longer'" (Martin Luther King, Jr.). "The mother of the Civil Rights Movement," Parks refused to relinquish her bus seat to a white man on December 1, 1955, and sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott. With numerous black-and-white photographic illustrations.

PARKS, Rosa. *Rosa Parks: My Story*. With Jim Haskins. New York: Dial Books, (1992). Octavo, original half purple cloth, original dust jacket.

Book fine; trace of edge-wear, light toning to spine of near-fine dust jacket.

Introduction

"Rosa Parks: My Story," published in 1992 by Dial Books, is a compelling autobiography that offers readers a firsthand account of one of America's most iconic civil rights figures. Co-authored by Rosa Parks and Jim Haskins, this 192-page memoir goes beyond the widely known narrative of Parks' refusal to give up her bus seat in 1955, providing a comprehensive look at her entire life and her extensive involvement in the civil rights movement[1]. The book emerged during a period when America was still grappling with racial tensions, just a year after the Rodney King beating and subsequent riots in Los Angeles, making its publication particularly timely and relevant.

Parks and Haskins wrote this autobiography with the motivation to correct misconceptions about Parks' life and activism. By the early 1990s, Parks had become aware that her story had been simplified and depoliticized in popular culture, reducing her to merely a "tired seamstress" rather than acknowledging her decades of deliberate political activism[7][8]. The book was published during a time when Parks was still politically active, having participated in events such as the Million Man March and advocating for the release of Nelson Mandela[2]. Economically, the early 1990s saw America recovering from a recession, while politically, the country was transitioning from the Reagan-Bush era to the Clinton administration, with ongoing debates about racial justice, affirmative action, and civil rights legislation.

The cultural climate surrounding the book's publication was one of renewed interest in civil rights history, with many Americans seeking to understand the movement beyond its most famous figures and moments. "Rosa Parks: My Story" offered an opportunity to hear directly from a woman whose single act of defiance had become symbolic of the entire movement, but whose full story remained largely untold to the general public.

The Author

Rosa Louise McCauley Parks was born on February 4, 1913, in rural Alabama, where she experienced the harsh realities of segregation and racial discrimination from an early age. Her autobiography reveals that her great-grandparents were slaves until the end of slavery in 1865, and her grandparents and parents educated her on how to navigate life in segregated America[3][10]. Parks' grandfather instilled in her family a philosophy of not accepting mistreatment, something she describes as being "passed down almost in our genes"[5].

Despite limited educational opportunities for Black children in Montgomery, Parks strived to obtain an education, though her studies were interrupted by family health issues[3]. She eventually married Raymond Parks and became active in the Montgomery chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), where she served as secretary[12]. Her involvement with the NAACP was not merely administrative; she was deeply engaged in investigating cases of racial injustice, including the brutal rapes of Black women and the legal defense of Black men facing unjust prosecution[2].

On December 1, 1955, Parks' refusal to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus led to her arrest and sparked the 381-day Montgomery Bus Boycott, a pivotal event in the civil rights movement that ultimately led to the U.S. Supreme Court ruling bus segregation unconstitutional[12]. Following the boycott, Parks faced significant personal hardships, including losing her job and receiving death threats[12]. In 1957, she and her husband moved to Detroit, where she continued her civil rights activism.

Throughout the 1990s, Parks remained politically engaged, participating in various civil rights events and authoring several autobiographical works[2]. In 1994, at the age of 81, she was assaulted in her home by a man who broke in and demanded money[2]. Despite this traumatic experience, Parks expressed compassion for her attacker, acknowledging "the conditions that made him"[2]. She received numerous accolades for her activism, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1996[13]. Rosa Parks passed away on October 24, 2005, at the age of 92, leaving behind a legacy of courage, dignity, and unwavering commitment to justice.

Why this is a Canonical Book

"Rosa Parks: My Story" must be included in the canon of essential American books for several compelling reasons. First, it provides an authentic, first-person account of one of the most pivotal moments in American civil rights history—Parks' refusal to give up her bus seat, which catalyzed the Montgomery Bus Boycott and helped launch the modern civil rights movement. This event fundamentally altered the trajectory of American race relations and challenged the legal foundations of segregation, eventually leading to landmark civil rights legislation[9].

Second, the autobiography corrects the oversimplified narrative that has dominated American cultural memory. Rather than portraying Parks as merely a tired seamstress who spontaneously

decided not to move, the book reveals her as a deliberate, politically conscious activist with years of experience in the civil rights movement[8]. This correction is essential for understanding the strategic, organized nature of the civil rights movement and counters the myth that social change occurs through isolated individual actions rather than collective, sustained effort.

Third, Parks' memoir provides crucial insights into the lived experience of segregation in the American South, documenting the daily indignities, threats, and violence that Black Americans faced. Her descriptions of growing up in Jim Crow Alabama offer readers a window into a shameful period of American history that continues to influence contemporary race relations[3]. By detailing how segregation operated on a personal level, the book helps readers understand the systemic nature of racism in American society.

Fourth, the book illuminates the often-overlooked role of women in the civil rights movement. While men like Martin Luther King Jr. have received the majority of historical attention, Parks' story highlights how women served as the "organizing backbone" of the movement despite being frequently sidelined from public leadership roles[8]. This perspective is essential for a complete understanding of how social movements function and succeed.

Finally, "Rosa Parks: My Story" embodies core American values of courage, dignity, and the pursuit of justice in the face of oppression. Parks' statement that she was "tired of giving in" rather than physically tired resonates with the American ideal of standing up against injustice[5]. Her story demonstrates how ordinary citizens can challenge unjust laws and systems, reflecting the democratic principle that governmental authority derives from the consent of the governed and that citizens have both the right and responsibility to resist unjust applications of power.

For these reasons, "Rosa Parks: My Story" deserves canonical status as a book that not only reflects critical elements of America's political and cultural history but also embodies fundamental American values of justice, equality, and civic courage.

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, [...] the only tired I was, was tired of giving in." [5]

This quote directly challenges the simplified narrative of Parks as merely a physically exhausted woman who acted spontaneously. Instead, it reveals her conscious decision to resist injustice after years of accommodation. In our current times, this quote remains profoundly relevant as it speaks to the psychological toll of persistent discrimination and the moment when individuals decide they can no longer accept unjust treatment. It resonates with contemporary social justice movements that emphasize the importance of refusing to normalize oppression. The quote also highlights the agency and intentionality behind Parks' action, countering narratives that diminish the strategic thinking of civil rights activists.

2. "What I learned best at Miss White's school was that I was a person with dignity and self-respect, and I should not set my sights lower than anybody else just because I was black."[5]

This statement underscores the crucial role of education in fostering self-worth and ambition in the face of societal messages of inferiority. Today, as debates continue about educational equity, representation in curricula, and the psychological impact of educational environments on marginalized students, Parks' words remind us that schools can either reinforce or challenge societal hierarchies. The quote speaks to the ongoing importance of creating educational spaces that affirm the dignity and potential of all students, regardless of their background.

3. "The more we gave in and complied, the worse they treated us."[6]

Parks' observation about the counterproductive nature of compliance with unjust systems remains remarkably relevant today. This insight applies to numerous contemporary contexts, from workplace discrimination to international relations, suggesting that acquiescence to injustice often emboldens rather than satisfies those who benefit from it. The quote challenges the notion that marginalized groups should prioritize comfort and convenience over confronting systemic problems, offering a strategic rationale for principled resistance.

4. "I had decided that I would not go anywhere with a piece of paper in my hand asking white folks for any favors. I had made that decision myself, as an individual."[5]

This statement reveals Parks' commitment to personal dignity and her refusal to participate in humiliating rituals of subordination. In today's context, it speaks to questions about how individuals navigate systems that require them to seek permission or approval from those with power, and the importance of maintaining self-respect even within constraining circumstances. The quote also highlights the tension between individual conscience and systemic requirements, a dilemma that remains relevant across various social and political contexts.

5. "I always advise students who like to read that they should read everything from license plates on cars to signs on the highway, fiction, nonfiction, newspapers, magazines—I mean everything. You never know what you might learn or when and where you can use the information."[5]

This quote demonstrates Parks' lifelong commitment to learning and intellectual curiosity. In our current information-saturated age, her advice to read widely and diversely remains valuable, encouraging critical engagement with multiple sources and perspectives. The quote also reveals Parks as an educator who understood that knowledge comes from unexpected places, challenging hierarchical notions of what constitutes valuable information. In an era of increasing specialization and filter bubbles, Parks' advocacy for broad reading habits offers a timeless reminder of the value of intellectual openness.

Five Major Ideas

1. **Courage as a Deliberate Choice**

Throughout "My Story," Parks presents courage not as an inherent trait but as a conscious decision made in specific circumstances. Her refusal to give up her bus seat was not a spontaneous act but the culmination of years of witnessing and experiencing injustice[9]. Parks writes about how she had "decided that I would have to know, once and for all, what rights I had as a human being, and a citizen"[9]. This theme challenges the notion that heroic actions require extraordinary individuals, suggesting instead that ordinary people can make extraordinary choices when they reach their breaking point with injustice. Parks' framing of courage as a deliberate choice rather than an emotional reaction offers readers a model of principled resistance that is accessible and replicable.

2. **The Power of Collective Action**

While Parks' individual act of defiance is central to her story, the book emphasizes that meaningful social change required organized, collective response. The Montgomery Bus Boycott succeeded because an entire community mobilized in support, sustaining their protest for 381 days[9]. Parks details how the boycott was organized by community leaders, including the Women's Political Council and local ministers, and how everyday citizens made sacrifices to maintain it[8]. This theme counters individualistic interpretations of social change, highlighting instead the necessity of community solidarity and strategic organization. The book demonstrates that while individual acts of courage can spark movements, sustainable change requires collective commitment and coordinated action.

3. **The Intergenerational Nature of Resistance**

Parks traces her sense of dignity and resistance to her family heritage, particularly her grandfather's influence. She writes that her grandfather "instilled in my mother and her sisters, and in their children, that you don't put up with bad treatment from anybody. It was passed down almost in our genes"[5]. This theme of intergenerational resistance challenges the notion that the civil rights movement emerged suddenly in the 1950s, revealing instead its roots in decades of family and community resistance to oppression. Parks' emphasis on how resistance strategies and values were transmitted across generations offers insights into how social movements build upon historical foundations and how families can serve as sites of political education and identity formation.

4. **The Psychological Impact of Segregation**

Throughout her autobiography, Parks vividly describes the psychological toll of living under segregation—the constant vigilance required, the suppression of natural reactions to mistreatment, and the struggle to maintain self-worth in a society that systematically devalued

Black lives. She recounts how Black children were taught specific behaviors to avoid provoking white violence and how this created a climate of perpetual fear[3]. This theme illuminates the often-overlooked psychological dimensions of oppression, demonstrating how systems like segregation harmed not just through material deprivation but also through psychological trauma. Parks' analysis anticipates contemporary discussions about racial trauma and the psychological effects of systemic racism.

5. The Complexity of Respectability Politics

Parks' story reveals the complex role of "respectability" in civil rights strategy. While her "flawless character" made her an ideal symbol for the movement[9], the book also shows how respectability could be both a strategic tool and a constraint, particularly for women. Parks describes how she was prevented from speaking at a rally despite being hailed as a "heroine," reflecting gender inequalities within the movement[2]. This theme offers a nuanced perspective on the strategic deployment of respectability as a civil rights tactic while also acknowledging its limitations and costs, particularly in reinforcing certain hierarchies. Parks' account helps readers understand the complex calculations involved in social movement strategy and the particular burdens placed on women activists.

Three Major Controversies

1. The Depoliticization of Rosa Parks

One of the most significant controversies surrounding Parks' story involves how her image and narrative have been depoliticized in popular culture and educational materials. As historian Jeanne Theoharis argues, the "popular narrative of Rosa Parks as a 'quiet' and 'accidental' figure in the civil rights movement obscures her lifelong radical activism and political philosophy"[2]. This sanitized portrayal separates Parks "from a community of people who prepared the way for her action" and obscures the "variety of struggles" she participated in[2]. The controversy extends to how Parks is taught in schools, with educator Herbert Kohl noting that portraying her as merely "a poor, tired seamstress and not talk[ing] about her role as a community leader" transforms "an organized struggle for freedom into a personal act of frustration"[14].

This depoliticization serves particular political interests, allowing Parks to be celebrated without acknowledging the radical nature of her activism or the ongoing nature of the struggles she fought for. It enables a narrative of racial progress that suggests racism is largely a problem of the past, addressed through individual moral courage rather than systemic change. Parks' autobiography directly challenges this depoliticization by detailing her decades of political activism and placing her bus protest within a broader context of organized resistance.

2. Gender Inequality Within the Civil Rights Movement

Parks' autobiography reveals significant gender inequalities within the civil rights movement itself, challenging idealized portrayals of the movement as uniformly progressive. She recounts how, despite being hailed as a "heroine" at a rally following her arrest, she was told she had "said enough" when she asked if she should address the crowd[2]. This silencing has been "interpreted by some as reflecting gender inequality within the civil rights movement"[2]. Theoharis notes that Parks "was lauded by the crowd as their heroine but not consulted for her vision of the struggle and subsequent political strategy"[2].

This controversy highlights tensions between fighting external oppression while reproducing internal hierarchies, a challenge that continues to face social justice movements today. It raises questions about whose voices are centered in movements for change and how leadership is defined and recognized. Parks' account challenges celebratory narratives of the civil rights movement by revealing its internal contradictions and limitations, particularly regarding gender.

3. The "Monumentalist Hero" Narrative

Academic Dennis Carlson argues that the popular conception of Rosa Parks transforms her into a "monumentalist hero," a figure used to "reinforce conservative narratives of American history and morality"[2]. According to Carlson, this portrayal "isolates her act of defiance, framing it as an individual, legally-focused moment of courage that both ignited and calmed a potentially violent Black community"[2]. This framing serves to contain the radical implications of Parks' activism by presenting it as exceptional rather than exemplary, and by suggesting that social change should proceed through orderly legal channels rather than disruptive protest.

The controversy centers on how Parks' legacy has been appropriated to serve various political agendas, often in ways that contradict her actual politics and the strategies of the movement she participated in. Parks' autobiography challenges this appropriation by presenting her activism as part of a continuum of resistance and by detailing the multiple tactics, including direct action and economic boycott, that the movement employed beyond legal challenges.

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read "Rosa Parks: My Story" for several compelling reasons. First, the book provides an essential corrective to simplified narratives about a pivotal moment in American history. By hearing directly from Parks herself, readers gain a more nuanced understanding of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the broader civil rights movement, including the strategic thinking, community organization, and personal courage that made change possible. This deeper understanding is crucial for citizens seeking to comprehend how social change occurs and what lessons can be applied to contemporary struggles for justice.

Second, Parks' autobiography offers valuable insights into the lived experience of segregation and racism in America. At a time when debates about America's racial history have become increasingly polarized, Parks' firsthand account provides a grounding in historical reality that can inform more thoughtful civic discourse. Her descriptions of growing up in Jim Crow Alabama, navigating the daily humiliations of segregation, and working within the NAACP to document and challenge racial violence offer crucial historical context for understanding contemporary racial inequities.

Third, the book demonstrates the power of ordinary citizens to challenge unjust systems, a fundamental principle of democratic governance. Parks' story embodies the idea that governmental authority derives from the consent of the governed and that citizens have both the right and responsibility to withdraw that consent when laws violate basic principles of justice and equality. In an era when many Americans feel disempowered by complex political and economic systems, Parks' example offers a powerful reminder of citizen agency and the potential impact of principled resistance.

Fourth, "Rosa Parks: My Story" illuminates the relationship between individual action and collective movement, showing how personal courage must be supported by community organization to achieve lasting change. This understanding is essential for effective civic engagement, challenging both the myth of the lone hero and the excuse that individual actions don't matter. Parks' narrative demonstrates how these elements work together, offering a model for civic action that balances personal responsibility with collective solidarity.

Finally, Parks' autobiography reveals the human dimension of historical events that are often presented in abstract terms. By sharing her thoughts, fears, and motivations, Parks transforms civil rights history from a sequence of events into a deeply human story of courage, dignity, and perseverance in the face of oppression. This humanization is essential for civic education that seeks not just to inform but to inspire, connecting readers emotionally as well as intellectually to their civic heritage and responsibilities.

For all these reasons, "Rosa Parks: My Story" deserves to be read by every American who seeks to understand their country's past and contribute meaningfully to its future. It stands as a canonical text that not only documents a pivotal moment in American history but also embodies enduring principles of justice, equality, and civic courage that remain essential to American democracy.

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