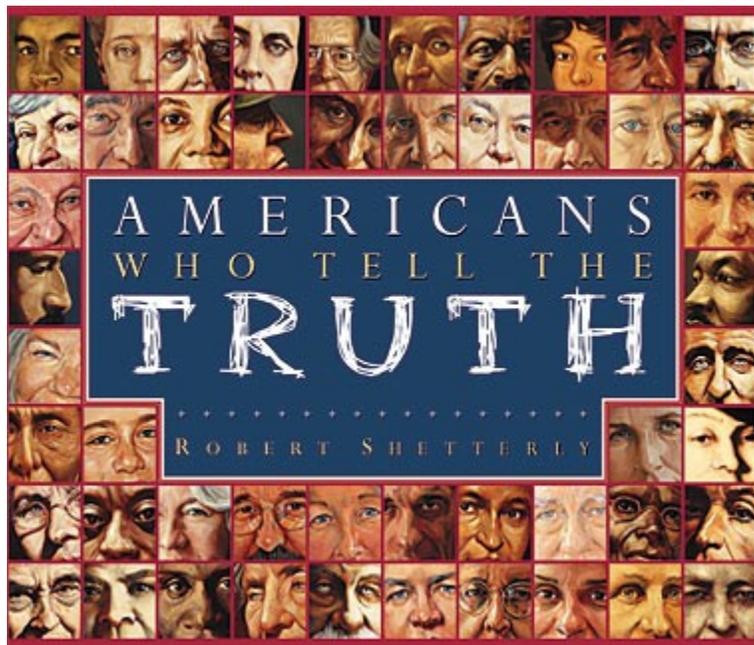


Literature Guide for Robert Shetterly's

Americans Who Tell the Truth



by Robin M. Huntley

Summary

The product of an ongoing art project promoting civic engagement and community involvement, Robert Shetterly's Americans Who Tell the Truth is a book filled with biographical portraits, with information presented both visually and within the text. Composed of portraits of significant figures in American history, the project from which the book's contents are drawn pairs beautifully painted images with poignant quotes highlighting the historical and cultural significance of each person featured.

Shetterly, a children's book illustrator from Maine, has been touring *Americans Who Tell the Truth* as an exhibit since 2003, and the project has continued to grow over the years. Centered around Shetterly's belief in the importance of dissent in democracy, the artist's goal was to share the themes of community sustainability, obligation to citizenship, and the importance of truth in politics and the media.

Featuring greats like Abraham Lincoln, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Rosa Parks, Americans Who Tell the Truth is largely composed of more obscure – but equally important – truth-tellers. The majority of the project's portraits showcase community activists, artists, scientists, and champions of sustainability, equality, tolerance, and social justice. Alongside big names in history, readers of the book will find names like Samantha Smith, Lily Yeh, and Bruce Gagnon (a young peace activist, artist, and community organizer, respectively).

Whether actively used to teach students about the importance of citizenship or shared with children as a more casual topic of interest, Americans Who Tell the Truth spotlights a powerful project with lots of educational potential. Seeing lesser-known activists, advocates, and other change-makers highlighted alongside infamous greats can help children to recognize the power of their own voice, knowledge, and experience. They too, they will learn, can be an important force of change.

As the book's content delves into themes that are most accessible to older readers, it is best used

with older audiences – tweens, teens, and adults. Younger readers can still glean information from the portraits, and can certainly be taught the basics about many of the people featured in the book, but the resources included in this guide are designed for much older readers.

Critical Thinking Questions

Written for use during and after reading *Americans Who Tell the Truth*, these questions will help readers deepen their understanding of the importance of each of the people featured in the book. These critical thinking questions can be used to guide a group discussion, serve as a prompt for a written reflection, or support readers in recognizing the major themes addressed within the book.

- Why do you think Robert Shetterly chose to create his *Americans Who Tell the Truth* project?
- *Americans Who Tell the Truth* began in 2003. What was the political climate of the United States like at that time? How might it have contributed to Shetterly's development of the project?
- Which of the people featured in the project seems most/least like you? Explain.
- Why do you think that Shetterly chose to include quotes *within* the paintings, rather than alongside them?
- How has the face of “truth-telling” changed over time?
- What kind of life circumstances or experiences do you think could have inspired the people featured in the book to feel it was imperative that they tell the truth to the world?
- Do you think that the portraits show diversity (racial, socioeconomic, religious, gender-based, political, etc.)? Explain.
- How do you think Shetterly decides who to include? How do you think he determines when and in what order to add people to the project?

- Do you think that it's important to tell the truth in the way that the people featured in the book have? Explain.

Mini-Lesson

This lesson is designed for use with teen readers who have strong skills in critical thinking. The lesson will require some preparation on the facilitator's part, and for best results requires collaboration on the participants' part. The lesson is designed to support readers in identifying the many different backgrounds from which the truth-tellers included in the book have come. Additionally, the lesson challenges readers to think deeply about the realm(s) in which the accomplishments of each person took place. The purpose of this particular challenge is to allow readers to recognize that the ability to impact society is not limited to a specific context or type of person; rather, it is limited to a specific behavior: telling the truth.

Truth-Teller Sort

This lesson will take at least 30 minutes, and requires 15-30 minutes of preparation. Facilitators will need *at least* one photocopy of each portrait and its accompanying information. Portraits that share a page with another portrait will need to be separated so that they can be moved about individually. If this activity is to be done with a large group, multiple (2-3) copies of each portrait will be necessary. This lesson should be done after readers have had a chance to explore and read the book, and at a point where readers have a level of moderate familiarity with the accomplishments of many (but not all) of the people featured.

1. Inform readers that they'll be working to sort portraits into groups based on the background from which each person came. Explain to readers that they'll be looking to determine numerous things about each portrait, including things like career, political affiliation, culture, gender, age, etc.

2. Review with readers the structure for creating bubble map (also known as concept maps). Such maps begin with one central circle, in which the topic for the map is written. Then, they radiate outward, with each new bubble representing a new idea. Bubbles directly connected to the center represent sub-topics. Bubbles connected to sub-topics reveal facts about these sub-topics, and bubbles connected to facts reveal details. Another layer may be added to show clarifying information about details. *(See final page for an example showing a central topic surrounded by sub-topic bubbles.)*
3. *(Optional)* If readers aren't familiar with this bubble map structure or haven't used it as a sorting tool before, practice sorting familiar items and categorizing them in a bubble map before sorting the portraits. Trying this activity with familiar items whose characteristics are easy to identify will help readers master the bubble map structure and better prepare them to sort the less familiar portraits.
4. Give pairs or trios of readers each a bubble map template. Be sure to use templates that allow for lots of new bubbles to be added.
5. Give pairs or trios of readers each 10-15 portraits (ambitious groups may sort all of the portraits if they wish). Ask them to identify one **big** thing that all of the subjects have in common. Examples include telling the truth, serving as a political activist, making an impact on the world around them, speaking up, etc. Ask groups to write this commonality in the center of their bubble map.
6. Ask groups to begin to sort their large group into smaller categories based on the issues that each portrait subject addressed in their truth telling. Groups will need to use the quotes included in each portrait as well as the short biographical information available alongside the portraits. If groups are working with a small number of portraits, they may also choose to use the biographical information included in the back of the book to do this sorting. Ask groups to add each new category that they identify onto their

bubble map as a sub-topic.

7. Allow groups to further sort their portraits until each subject ends up in a category of their own. From the sub-topic groups, readers may begin to think about things like gender, political affiliation, age, race, and time period in order to sort portraits into smaller and smaller categories.
8. After groups have finished sorting, allow time for them to share their bubble maps with each other. Search for similarities and differences, and allow groups to discuss their decision making process with others.

Extension Activities

Designed with tween and teen readers in mind, these extension activities are written generally so as to allow them to be easily adapted for use in numerous educational contexts and in a variety of communities. Each activity can be done exactly as outlined, but also includes opportunities to add breadth and depth to the ideas and issues addressed.

Who Else Tells the Truth?

Shetterly's *Americans Who Tell the Truth* project includes a great many portraits that are not included in the book. Compare the book's contents to the entire project's contents, and learn about those who were not included (it has been a few years since the book was published). Where would these people fall on the portrait sort bubble map? Has Shetterly's focus changed from one type of truth teller to another? Can you tell whether or not current events might have influenced who he has chosen to include? All these questions (and many more) can lead to deeper learning.

Local Truth-Tellers

If *Americans Who Tell the Truth* was a project about your community and the book featured

only local heroes, who would it spotlight? Readers can choose their own local truth teller to interview, photograph, and paint, emulating Shetterly's style. Portraits of local truth tellers can be shared publicly in a visible location or through the internet.

Telling Your Own Truth

The portraits in the book not only share with readers what each subject looked like, but they convey some of each subject's personality. Shetterly's painting style and decision to use realistic portraits to paint from (ones where they subjects are not feigning happiness – their expressions are genuine and realistic) allows his portraits to speak volumes about their subjects. Emulating Shetterly's style, readers can create their own portraits of themselves, paying close attention to honestly share the details of their own face. Then, readers can challenge themselves to develop a short statement to add, just as Shetterly has included quotes. Readers should seek to add statements that speak to some part of their own personal truth (the identification of such a quote could serve as an extension activity in and of itself).

Examining Portraits

Shetterly's style is a very specific one, and he clearly strives to tell the truth visually as his subjects strove to tell the truth through actions and words. Not all artists take the same approach to portraiture, and a visit to a local museum or art gallery can back up this claim. Find a local resource (museum or gallery) at which to examine portraits, or peruse an online collection of portraits. Examine each artist's style, and consider the things that they may have been trying to convey through their choice of subject and their artistic style.

Sample Bubble Map

