

Don't Say Ain't

by Irene Smalls

Talewinds, an imprint of Charlesbridge Publishing

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY:

Dana is jumping rope with her best friends, Cindybelle and Ellamae, when Godmother appears and announces, "My baby's passed a test. Goin' to an advanced school!" Dana is unsure; can she keep her old friends in her new life? When she passes Cindybelle and Ellamae on the sidewalk on the first day of school, Dana hears Cindybelle mutter, "She thinks she's better'n us cause she's goin' to that advanced school now." Dana is sad and confused, and things don't improve at the new school. In her starched and pressed party dress, she stands out from her classmates, who wear pleated skirts and sweater sets. Her teacher, also African-American, asks Dana (*in public*) not to use the word "ain't," but later the teacher visits Dana's home and says the forbidden word while talking with Godmother. Everything is upside down! She runs outside to be with her friends, who finally accept that she is still the same person. By the end of the story, Dana discovers that language can belong to specific places and situations.

A wonderful story set in the late 1950's about friendship, language, and cultural differences.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. The author Irene Smalls writes, "Dana got a book. She gently held Godmother's hand, showing Godmother the words as she read them." Why would Dana do this? Why does Godmother want her to succeed at the new school?
2. What are some of the different things that happen to Dana at school? How would you feel if these things happened to you? Why was Dana afraid to answer the math question at first?
3. How is Mrs. Middleton's visit to Dana's house important to the story? Do you think it will change the way Dana feels about the new school?

ACTIVITIES:

1. Practice Double Dutch jump rope with your friends.

2. Learn the rhyme:

*Don't say ain't or your momma will faint,
And your father will fall in a bucket of paint;
Your sister will cry till the fourth of July,
And your dog will call the FBI.*

Once the rhyme is learned, jump rope while repeating it.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Excerpted from the African American Literature Book Club: <http://aalbc.com/>

"As a former Miss Black New York State, Young Ambassador to Europe, and a student activist, I have had lots of jobs, ranging from model, actress, and radio reporter to running my own business, establishing a networking group for business professionals, and working in government," says Irene Smalls. "But the job I really like is writing children's books. I write very simple stories about my children, my childhood. I grew up in Harlem in the 1950's. Back then; Harlem was a small, southern black community that just happened to be in the North. The dialect, the foods, the mores and values were Southern. Harlem was a ghetto of softness and strength, a community of open doors and open hearts that loved its children."

HELPFUL LINKS:

A second discussion guide for *Don't Say Ain't* can be found at:

<http://www.charlesbridge.com/msp/catalog/product/detail.do?id=1084>

Homepage for Irene Smalls: <http://www.irenesmalls.com>

Website for the National Double Dutch League: <http://www.nationaldoubledutchleague.com>



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