

Rita Williams-Garcia Curriculum Guide and Classroom Resources

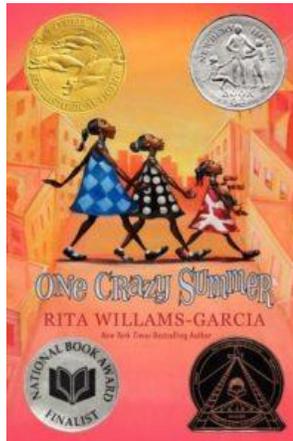
Winner of the 2019 Zarrow Award for Young Readers' Literature –
Rita Williams-Garcia

Lesson ideas for selected reading: *One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams-Garcia

Prepared by Laura Raphael, MA, MLIS, Children's Services Coordinator, Tulsa City-County Library

Author's web site: <https://rita-williamsgarcia.squarespace.com/> – includes:

- [About Me](#) short biography
- [Video interviews](#) of Rita Williams-Garcia
- [Frequently asked questions](#)



Harper Collins discussion guide of *One Crazy Summer*:

<http://files.harpercollins.com/PDF/TeachingGuides/0060760885.pdf>

Eleven-year-old Delphine has it together. Even though her mother, Cecile, abandoned her and her younger sisters, Vonetta and Fern, seven years ago. Even though her father and Big Ma will send them from Brooklyn to Oakland, California, to stay with Cecile for the summer. And even though Delphine will have to take care of her sisters, as usual, and learn the truth about the missing pieces of the past.

When the girls arrive in Oakland in the summer of 1968, Cecile wants nothing to do with them. She makes them eat Chinese takeout dinners, forbids them to enter her kitchen, and never explains the strange visitors with Afros and black berets who knock on her door. Rather than spend time with them, Cecile sends Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern to a summer camp sponsored by a revolutionary group, the Black Panthers, where the girls get a radical new education.

Set during one of the most tumultuous years in recent American history, *One Crazy Summer* is the heartbreaking, funny tale of three girls in search of the mother who abandoned them—an unforgettable story told by a distinguished author of books for children and teens, Rita Williams-Garcia.

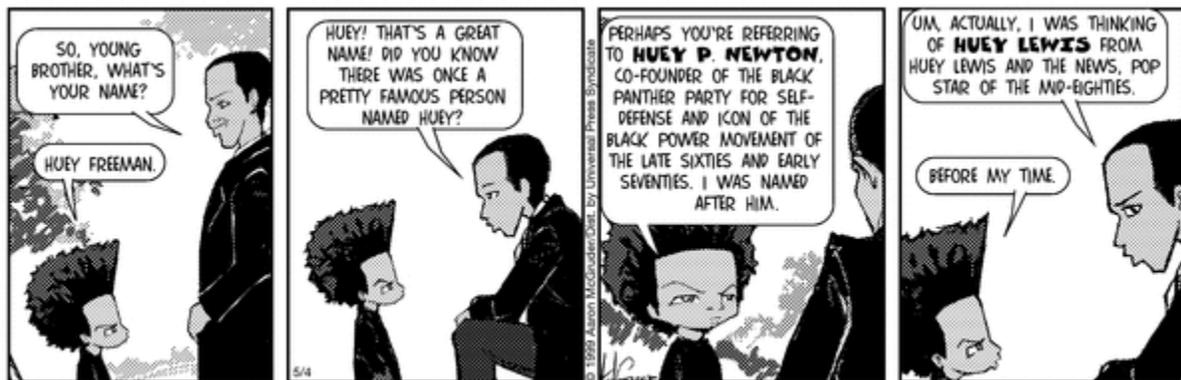
Curriculum Guide for “One Crazy Summer” by 2019 Zarrow Award Winner Rita Williams-Garcia –
Created by Youth Services Department, Tulsa City-County Library, page 1

Consider Your Approach to Teaching “One Crazy Summer”

“One Crazy Summer” is set in the year of 1968, one of our country’s most difficult, explosive, and conflict-ridden. It included the assassinations of both Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. and presidential candidate Robert Kennedy, and multiple societal issues – including the Vietnam War – were prominent in daily news.

In particular, the novel presents a part of our national history that your students likely do not know much about: the controversial Black Panther Party, which began in Oakland, California (where the majority of the novel is set) in 1966. A self-described “Party of the People,” the Black Panthers subscribed to reformist goals such as housing, employment, and education for African-Americans.

Similar to the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement, the Panthers were seen by many people (including some African-Americans) as radical, lawless, and frightening, while others were inspired by their more activist approach to achieving Civil Rights goals.



[“Boondocks” comic strip (1996-2006) by Aaron McGruder]

“One Crazy Summer” is, at its core, a story about three sisters trying to connect with a distant mother during a trying time. It’s funny and engaging, the dialogue fairly snaps off the page, and the characters feel as real as your own siblings.

However, it is also historical fiction that uses the setting of 1968 in general, and the Black Panther Party movement in Oakland, California specifically, as the backdrop of the story.

Our recommendation is to teach this novel as you would any historical fiction by exploring some of the facts of this time period with your students. Not only will learning more about the Black Panthers and their goals lead to a better understanding of the story, it will also give your students core knowledge for future reading.

For advice on how to handle teaching controversial topics, please see this article:

<http://www.teachhub.com/no-offense-teaching-controversial-topics>

Background about the Black Panther Movement

C-SPAN description of the Black Panther Movement:

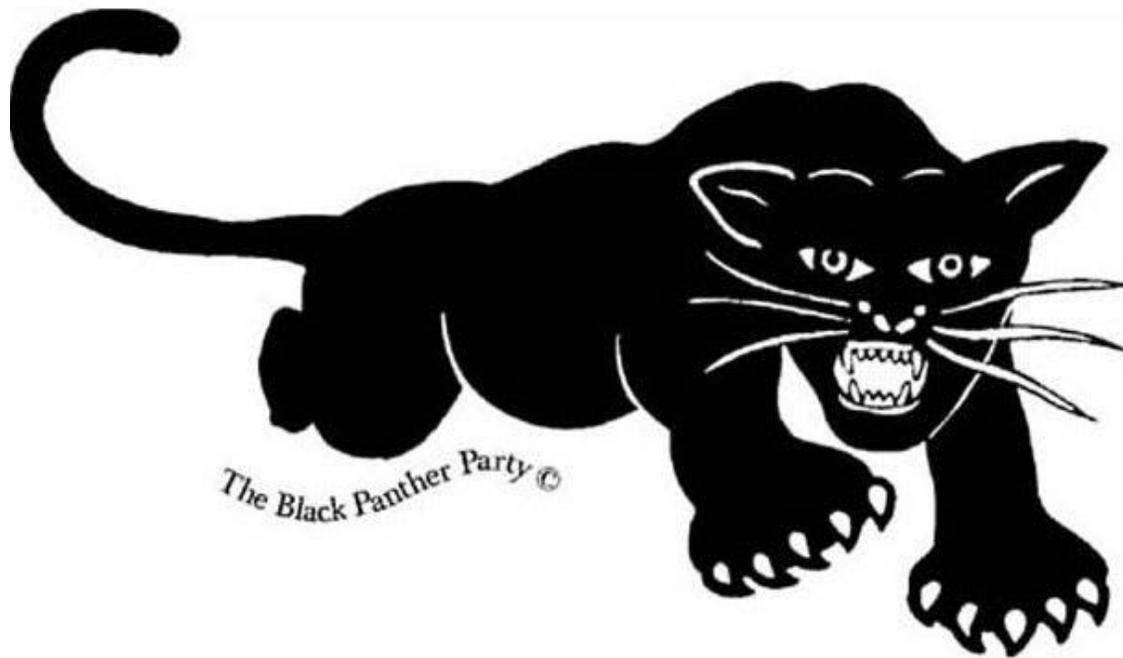
On October 15, 1966, in Oakland, CA, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton founded the Black Panther Party. This group established their 10 Point Program outlining issues that were significant among members of the African American community, particularly with regard to the U.S. government. Included in these points was improving economic and social conditions among African Americans, establishing community programs, and ensuring safety in their communities. As their party grew, they coalesced with organizations across the country to grow awareness and promote change.

Here are some C-SPAN video clips that might be helpful in introducing the Black Panther Party:

<https://www.c-span.org/classroom/document/?5054>

Video #2 – Black Panther Party Co-Founder Bobby Seale about why he left his engineer position to go into social activism (about 3 minutes)

Video #4 – Lynn French about women in the Black Panther Party (she was a member 1968-71) (about 5 minutes)

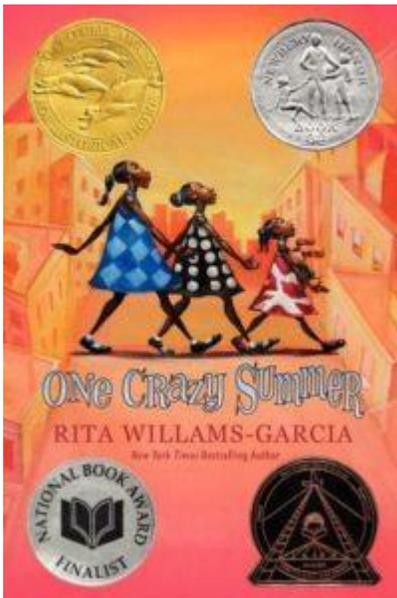


"I suggested that we use the panther as our symbol and call our political vehicle the Black Panther Party. The panther is a fierce animal, but he will not attack until he is backed into a corner; then he will strike out." Huey Newton

Lesson: Judging the Book By Its Cover

The famous adage is “Don’t judge a book by its cover,” but doing just that can be a great way to prepare students for reading a book. Artists and authors work together to create interesting covers that give hints to the characters, setting, and plot. Other markers such as the author’s name (bigger than the title? listing past books?) and awards also help in a “pre-reading” exercise.

To judge “One Crazy Summer” by its most recent cover, you can either project the cover on a Smartboard or hand out books to students. (If the latter, give them strict instructions NOT to open the book or look at the back yet! Of course, this will immediately make them want to do just that.)



Pointing to the book’s cover, ask “What are some things we can predict about this book by just looking at the cover?”

Some additional questions to ask might include:

- What time of year is this novel set in?
- Who do you think the main character or characters are?
- If they are the three girls, what can we tell about them?
- What kind of place are they?
- Are they related?
- What else do you see on the cover that is not part of the illustrations? (The award seals) What does that tell us about the book? Why would the publisher put these on the cover?

Possible answers and observations:

- The title is “One Crazy Summer”, so we can guess that the novel is set during the summer season. Additionally, the girls on the cover are wearing sleeveless dresses and have bare legs, so it’s reasonable to guess that it is either in a warmer time of year or a warmer place.
- The three girls are most likely the main characters. They appear to be related, perhaps sisters or cousins, because they look alike and are wearing similar dresses and shoes.

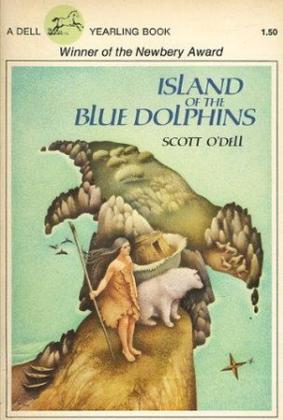
Lesson: Six Important Objects

This can be used as a pre-reading activity to introduce students to the book or as a post-reading activity to recall important details and make connections to theme and plot.

As a pre-reading activity, tell your students that “One Crazy Summer” has a number of objects that tell us more about the characters or play important roles in the plot. Then share each object by projecting them on a Smart Board or in a handout and tell them to keep these in mind as they are reading.

Pay attention to these objects when they come up in the novel:

	<p>Miss Patty Cake baby doll –the youngest sister Fern carries this doll with her everywhere. What happens to it and why?</p>
	<p>Timex watch – the main character Delphine relies on this watch; what does this tell us about what kind of person she is?</p>
	<p>Shrimp lo mein – This is a dish the girls get at a Chinese restaurant in California. Why do they get their meals here?</p>

	<p>Books – Peter Pan; Island of the Blue Dolphins; Merriam Webster dictionary – the main character brings the first two books with her to California and refers to the last one frequently.</p>
	<p>Fountain pen – Cecile (Inzilla), the mother of the girls, uses fountain pens and a printing press in her kitchen, where she won't let the girls go into. What does she use it for? Why is it so important to her?</p>
	<p>Go-kart – Delphine rides in one of these later in her stay in California.</p>

Post-reading:

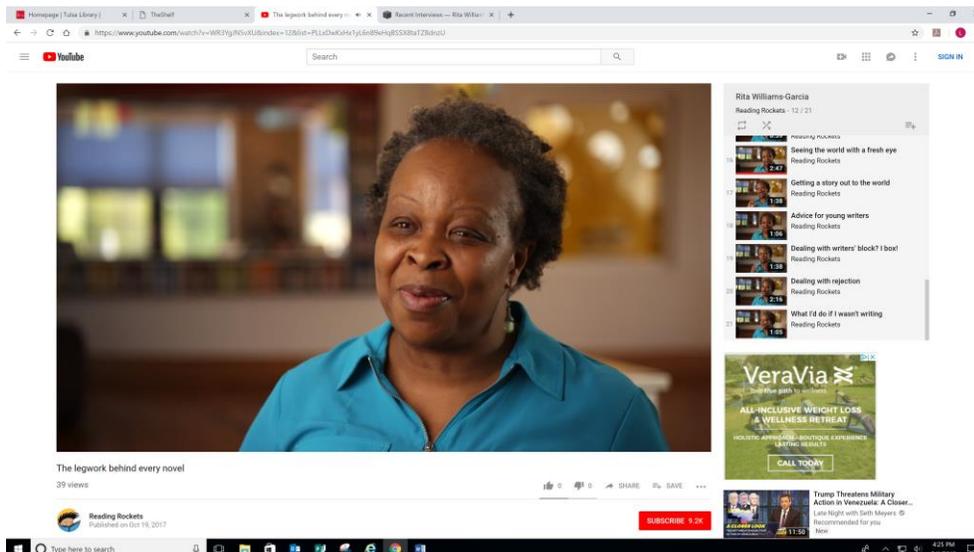
Re-visit all of the objects, using the questions above to discuss each one and their importance to the story. You could also ask students to choose one of the objects to write about and then share with the class.

Lesson: Getting to Know Rita Williams-Garcia

Reading Rockets has a series of videos interviewing Rita Williams-Garcia, which are delightful and will give students a close-up view of this extraordinary author. In this lesson, the class will watch the videos together, take notes, and then break into teams to create a quiz about Rita Williams-Garcia that the other team will take.

1. Prepare students to take notes about Rita Williams-Garcia as they watch the videos (in particular “What would you do if you weren’t writing?” and “Boxing”). What are some facts they learn about her in the videos? Alternatively: take notes as a class together.
2. Break your class into two or more teams.
3. Ask each team to create a 10-question quiz about Rita Williams-Garcia based on the facts they learned watching the videos.

- [Reading and writing as a child](#)
- [The story behind One Crazy Summer](#)
- [One Crazy Summer and the Black Panthers](#)
- [Writing about a mother who left her kids behind](#)
- [Seeing the world with a fresh eye](#)
- [Making the past come alive for young readers](#)
- [The legwork behind every novel](#)
- [Advice for young writers](#)
- [What would you do if you weren’t writing?](#)
- [Dealing with writer’s block? I box!](#)



Lesson: Mother vs. Cecile: Expectations vs. Reality

Cecile – also known as Inzilla to her fellow Black Panthers in Oakland – is the most maddening and mysterious character in the novel. Like Delphine and her sisters, as readers we have expectations of how she should behave that she does not adhere to.

A key excerpt of the novel presents the clash of expectations versus reality (p. 14):

Mother is a statement of fact. Cecile Johnson gave birth to us. We came out of Cecile Johnson. In the animal kingdom that makes her our mother. Every mammal on the planet has a mother, dead or alive. Ran off or stayed put. Cecile Johnson – mammal birth giver, alive, an abandoner – is our mother. A statement of fact.

Even in the song we sing when we miss having a mother – and not her but a mother, period – we sing about a mother. “Mother’s gotta go now, la-la-la-la...” Never Mommy, Mom, Mama, or Ma.

Mommy gets up to give you a glass of water in the middle of the night. Mom invites your friends inside when it’s raining. Mama burns your ears with the hot comb to make your hair look pretty for class picture day. Ma is sore and worn out from wringing your wet clothes an hanging them to dry; May needs peace and quiet at the end of the day.

We don’t have one of those. We have a statement of fact.

As a class, in small groups, or as individual students, ask students to list in one column the characteristics of a traditional mother. Then, in the second column, list the ways that Cecile behaves differently. An incomplete list:

Traditional mother	Cecile
Stays with children until they are grown.	Left her daughters when they were very young.
Warm, loving, concerned.	Will not let daughters into her kitchen.
	Does not feed daughters dinner.
	Does not spend much time with her daughters – tells them to go to summer camp but does not go with them the first day.

Extension or preparation for lesson:

Use the Character map in Appendix B to map out the characteristics of Cecile.
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Lesson: Literary Genres Crossover

“One Crazy Summer” is an example of a book with multiple genres – in this case, a combination of realistic fiction and historical fiction. It’s likely your students already know each of these genres already, but it’s a good idea to identify the features of both and how they appear in the novel to extend that knowledge.

A great introduction to the features of realistic fiction can be found in a short video (about 3 minutes) by Pang Her, “Literary Genre: Realistic Fiction”:

<https://safeshare.tv/x/ss56f9278c5013a>

1. Realistic fiction is still make-believe.
2. It could happen in real life.
3. Characters have no superpowers.
4. You feel like the story could happen to you.
5. The characters are realistic or could be alive today.

For each point, ask students to write or say how “One Crazy Summer” fits. For example, #1 – Delphine and her sisters are made-up characters who do not live in our world, but #2 – the things that they do (travel in an airplane, get Chinese food from the corner store) are things that could happen in real life.

The interesting thing is that this realistic story is also set in the past, more than 50 years ago. Historical fiction is usually realistic fiction that is set in a real place and a real time, and that sometimes has real-life people and events as characters and plots.

As a class, in groups, or as individuals, map out some historical facts that you learned from “One Crazy Summer”:

For example:

Fact:	How it comes up in “One Crazy Summer”:
1. 1968 was a difficult year with lots of protests.	1. Big Ma likes to watch evening news with all of the protests and problems.
2. Cassius Clay was a boxer who changed his name to “Muhammed Ali” because he wanted to protest racism.	2. Delphine tells her sisters that the plane is fighting the clouds like Cassius Clay fights other boxers.

Lesson: Picturing Black Panthers

Then as now, different people view the Black Panther Party differently.

As Rita Williams-Garcia writes (from Delphine’s perspective) in “One Crazy Summer”:

They [the Black Panthers] were on the news a lot lately. The Panthers on TV said they were in communities to protect poor black people from the powerful; to provide things like food, clothing, and medical help; and to fight racism. Even so, most people were afraid of Black Panthers because they carried rifles and shouted “Black Power.” (p. 45)

It wasn’t at all the way the television showed militants – that’s what they called the Black Panthers. Militants, who from the newspapers were angry fist wavers with their mouths wide-open and their rifles ready for shooting. They never showed anyone like Sister Mukumbu or Sister Pat, passing out toast and teaching in classrooms. (p. 87)

In this lesson, you will show different pictures of the Black Panther Party and compare how they are portrayed in each. Start with the common pictures Delphine is referring to. How do these pictures portray Black Panthers as “militant”? These were the pictures most often shown on television and in newspapers. How might readers or viewers be afraid of Black Panthers if these were the only pictures they saw?



Now look at other pictures of Black Panthers feeding children and families. These pictures were not as widely shown. What is the biggest difference between these pictures and the first pictures?



Lesson: “We Real Cool” Poem by Gwendolyn Brooks

This poem by Gwendolyn Brooks is recited at the protest at the end of the novel. Read the poem aloud and discuss the “twist” at the end, from something that seems attractive (they are “cool,” after all, and a life of music and games sounds like a good time on the surface) to something deadly.

Depending on the maturity of your students and the depth of their knowledge of the Black Panthers, you can discuss why the Black Panthers felt this was an appropriate poem to read at their protest. What is it about the society that would make the “we” – who we assume are black, because of the language and setting – take their lives so casually?

THE POOL PLAYERS.
SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

Extension Activity:

- Teach This Poem: “Knoxville, Tennessee” by Nikki Giovanni

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/lesson/teach-poem-knoxville-tennessee-nikki-giovanni>

Book Reviews of “One Crazy Summer”

Booklist:

Gr. 4-7 /*Starred Review*/ Eleven-year-old Delphine has only a few fragmented memories of her mother, Cecile, a poet who wrote verses on walls and cereal boxes, played smoky jazz records, and abandoned the family in Brooklyn after giving birth to her third daughter. In the summer of 1968, Delphine’s father decides that seeing Cecile is “something whose time had come,” and Delphine boards a plane with her sisters to Cecile’s home in Oakland. What they find there is far from their California dreams of Disneyland and movie stars. “No one told y’all to come out here,” Cecile says. “No one wants you out here making a mess, stopping my work.” Like the rest of her life, Cecile’s work is a mystery conducted behind the doors of the kitchen that she forbids her daughters to enter. For meals, Cecile sends the girls to a Chinese restaurant or to the local, Black Panther–run community center, where Cecile is known as Sister Inzilla and where the girls begin to attend youth programs. Regimented, responsible, strong-willed Delphine narrates in an unforgettable voice, but each of the sisters emerges as a distinct, memorable character, whose hard-won, tenuous connections with their mother build to an aching, triumphant conclusion. Set during a pivotal moment in African American history, this vibrant novel shows the subtle ways that political movements affect personal lives; but just as memorable is the finely drawn, universal story of children reclaiming a reluctant parent’s love. -- Engberg, Gillian (Reviewed 02-01-2010) (Booklist, vol 106, number 11, p61)

School Library Journal:

/* Starred Review */ Gr 4–7— It is 1968, and three black sisters from Brooklyn have been put on a California-bound plane by their father to spend a month with their mother, a poet who ran off years before and is living in Oakland. It's the summer after Black Panther founder Huey Newton was jailed and member Bobby Hutton was gunned down trying to surrender to the Oakland police, and there are men in berets shouting "Black Power" on the news. Delphine, 11, remembers her mother, but after years of separation she's more apt to believe what her grandmother has said about her, that Cecile is a selfish, crazy woman who sleeps on the street. At least Cecile lives in a real house, but she reacts to her daughters' arrival without warmth or even curiosity. Instead, she sends the girls to eat breakfast at a center run by the Black Panther Party and tells them to stay out as long as they can so that she can work on her poetry. Over the course of the next four weeks, Delphine and her younger sisters, Vonetta and Fern, spend a lot of time learning about revolution and staying out of their mother's way. Emotionally challenging and beautifully written, this book immerses readers in a time and place and raises difficult questions of cultural and ethnic identity and personal responsibility. With memorable characters (all three girls have engaging, strong voices) and a powerful story, this is a book well worth reading and rereading.—Teri Markson, Los Angeles Public Library --Teri Markson (Reviewed March 1 , 2010) (School Library Journal, vol 56, issue 3, p170)

Publishers Weekly:

Williams-Garcia (Jumped) evokes the close-knit bond between three sisters, and the fervor and tumultuousness of the late 1960s, in this period novel featuring an outspoken 11-year-old from Brooklyn, N.Y. Through lively first-person narrative, readers meet Delphine, whose father sends her and her two younger sisters to Oakland, Calif., to visit their estranged mother, Cecile. When Cecile picks

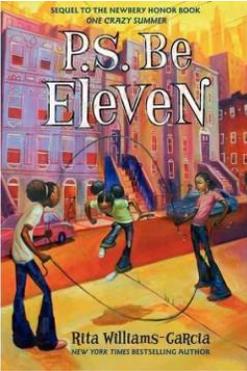
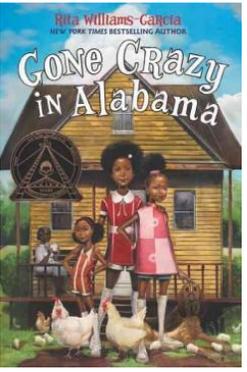
them up at the airport, she is as unconventional as Delphine remembers (“There was something uncommon about Cecile. Eyes glommed onto her. Tall, dark brown woman in man's pants whose face was half hidden by a scarf, hat, and big dark shades. She was like a colored movie star”). Instead of taking her children to Disneyland as they had hoped, Cecile shoos them off to the neighborhood People's Center, run by members of the Black Panthers. Delphine doesn't buy into all of the group's ideas, but she does come to understand her mother a little better over the summer . Delphine's growing awareness of injustice on a personal and universal level is smoothly woven into the story in poetic language that will stimulate and move readers. Ages 9–12. (Jan.) --Staff (Reviewed January 4, 2010) (Publishers Weekly, vol 257, issue 1 , p47)

Kirkus:

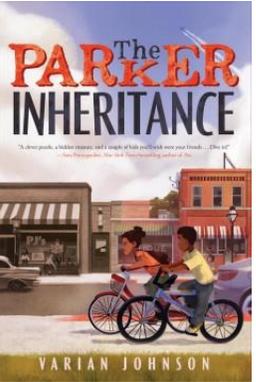
/ Starred Review */* A flight from New York to Oakland, Calif., to spend the summer of 1968 with the mother who abandoned Delphine and her two sisters was the easy part. Once there, the negative things their grandmother had said about their mother, Cecile, seem true: She is uninterested in her daughters and secretive about her work and the mysterious men in black berets who visit. The sisters are sent off to a Black Panther day camp, where Delphine finds herself skeptical of the worldview of the militants while making the best of their situation. Delphine is the pitch-perfect older sister, wise beyond her years, an expert at handling her siblings: "Just like I know how to lift my sisters up, I also knew how to needle them just right." Each girl has a distinct response to her motherless state, and Williams-Garcia provides details that make each characterization crystal clear. The depiction of the time is well done, and while the girls are caught up in the difficulties of adults, their resilience is celebrated and energetically told with writing that snaps off the page. (Historical fiction. 9-12) (Kirkus Reviews, January 15, 2010)

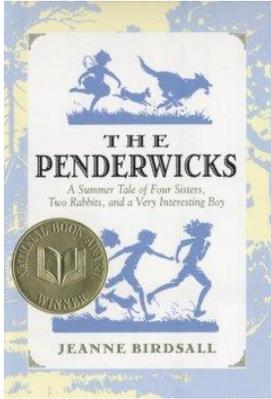
Related Novels

IMPORTANT: “One Crazy Summer” is the first in a trilogy, or three books, about the same characters.

	<p>P.S. Be Eleven by Rita Williams-Garcia A sequel to <i>One Crazy Summer</i> finds the Gaither sisters returning to Brooklyn, where they adapt to new feelings of independence while managing changes large and small, from Pa's new girlfriend to a very different Uncle Darnell's return from Vietnam.</p>
	<p>Gone Crazy In Alabama by Rita Williams-Garcia Spending the summer with their grandmother in the rural South, three sisters from Brooklyn discover the surprising reason behind their mother's estrangement from their aunt.</p>

If you are looking for more books similar to *One Crazy Summer*, you might want to consider these titles:

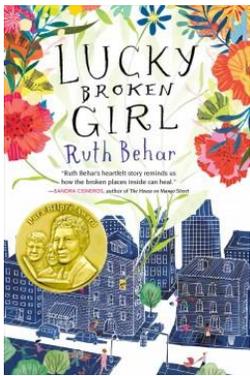
	<p>The Parker Inheritance by Varian Johnson Twelve-year-old Candice Miller is spending the summer in Lambert, South Carolina. When she finds the letter that sent her late grandmother on a treasure hunt, she finds herself caught up in the mystery and, with the help of her new friend and fellow bookworm, Brandon, she sets out to find the inheritance, exonerate her grandmother, and expose an injustice once committed against an African American family in Lambert. Reason: A fast-paced, funny book with plenty of adventure and an outspoken main character, this “puzzle book” takes its inspiration from the classic book “The Westing House” but also weaves in an historical sub-plot in the same time period as “One Crazy Summer.”</p>
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[The Penderwicks](#) by Jeanne Birdsall

While vacationing with their widowed father in the Berkshire Mountains, four lovable sisters, ages four through twelve, share adventures with a local boy, much to the dismay of his snobbish mother.

Reason: “While the time, settings and tone of these books are very different, the sisters in both ring true. Their crankiness gives way to eternal optimism that carries them through life's struggles and shows the strengths of love and family.” -- Tanya Tullos, NovelList database



[Lucky Broken Girl](#) by Ruth Behar

A semi-autobiographical story about a multicultural girl's coming-of-age in the 1960s describes how Cuban-Jewish Ruthie Mizrahi emigrates with her family from Castro's Cuba to New York, where a devastating accident challenges her perceptions about mortality and strength.

Reason: “Both character-driven historical novels set in the tumultuous 1960s star diverse girls who have complicated relationships with their mothers. Compelling first person narratives bring the historical settings and vibrant characters to life.” -- Lindsey Dunn, NovelList database

Appendix A: Grand Rapids Pubic Library Discussion Guide

Questions for Discussion

1. How would you describe Delphine's relationship with her sisters? How is it like your relationship with your sibling(s) or like the relationships of siblings you know? How is it different? What does Delphine mean when she says she enjoys her role as Vonetta and Fern's "enemy and big sister"?
2. What does Delphine expect from Cecile? Do her expectations differ from Vonetta's and Fern's expectations? Why? What word or words would you use to describe Cecile?
3. What does Delphine decide about Oakland on her first night there? If you were in her place, would you have come to a similar conclusion? Have you ever felt similarly about a place you've visisted? Did you discover anything that changed your mind?
4. Are Cecile and Delphine at all alike/ How? How are they different? What does Cecile mean when she tells Delphine that it wouldn't kill her to be selfish (p. 110)?
5. What elements in the story give you clues about the characters' personalities? Some of the characters have objects that are closely associated with them, like Delphine and her Timex. Cecile and her printing press, and Hirohito and his go-kart. What do these objects say about the characters? Can you find more examples of characters with close associations to objects in the story?
6. Names play an important role in the story? How does Cecile feel about names? How does she explain the name she gave herself, Nzila? Why is Delphine upset when she finds her name in the dictionary? Why does Cecile call Fern "Little Girl" for most of the book, and what finally causes her to call Fern "Fern"? Why does Delphine tell Fern her Cecile-given name, even though Cecile hadn't planned to tell her?
7. Are the Black Panthers Delphine observes at breakfast her first few mornings in Oakland like she expected them to be? How do Sister Mukumbu and Sister Pat differ from Delphine's expectations? What do you think she means when she says that "beating eggs never makes the evening news" (p. 64)?
8. What kind of image does Crazy Kelvin project? Is it possible to judge the Black Panther group based on Crazy Kelvin's actions? Do you think groups can be distinguished negatively or positively by the actions of individual members?
9. What does the stool in the kitchen mean to Delphine? Does her relationship with Cecile change the evening the stool appears? How?
10. How does Delphine feel about the messages of the Black Panthers? Why does she want to stop taking her sisters to the People's Center and skip the rally? Do her beliefs about the Black Panthers and their messages change throughout the story? How would you have felt in her place?
11. Do you feel any sympathy for Cecile throughout the book? Does hearing Cecile's story at the end make you more sympathetic toward her? How does Delphine react to learning her mother's side of the story she's been hearing for years? How do you think you would have felt in her place?
12. Do the sisters find what they were looking for on their trip to Oakland? Why or why not?

Appendix B: Character Map Template

CHARACTER MAP #1

Name: _____ Date: _____

The diagram is a character map template. It features a central oval labeled "Character". Surrounding this central oval are four rectangular boxes, each representing a different aspect of a character: "Feelings" (top-left), "Description" (top-right), "Behavior" (bottom-left), and "Personality Traits" (bottom-right). The boxes are arranged in a cross pattern around the central oval.

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