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The Voice that Challenged a Nation: Marian Anderson and the Struggle for Equal Rights

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Freedman, Russell. *The Voice that Challenged a Nation: Marian Anderson and the Struggle for Equal Rights*. Clarion, 2004. ISBN 0618159762. \$18.00. 114 pp.

Reviewer: Marsha D. Broadway

Reading Level: Intermediate, Young Adult

Rating: Outstanding

Genre: Biography;

Subject: Anderson, Marian, 1897-1993--Juvenile literature; Contraltos--United States--

Biography--Juvenile literature; African Americans--Civil rights--Juvenile literature; Women--

Biography--Juvenile literature; Book--Reviews;

Marian Andersen would not have chosen to be an activist, but her exception vocal abilities made the quiet, private woman a key figure in the civil rights movement. She struggled to receive vocal training; she trained and performed in Europe to accolades; but when she was denied the stage at Constitution Hall by Daughters of the American Revolution, Eleanor Roosevelt took up her cause. The result was the historic Easter Sunday Concert on April 9, 1939, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

Organizationally, Freedman sets the stage to bring readers into the life of Marian Anderson in the vivid opening description. Remarkable word images allow the reader to see, hear, and feel this significant event. With the reader prepared, Anderson's story is told within its historical context in easy-to-follow chronology. Using simple but eloquent language, Freedman conveys Anderson's passion for music and the concurrent struggle for equal rights. Through deft and incisive description and selected quotations, readers understand Marian's character, the strong familial bond, the role that the Philadelphia black community played in promoting her talent, her self-doubts, the everyday discrimination African-Americans faced, and her determination to have a singing career. Narrative flows seamlessly into quotations, giving readers not only a sense of history but also of personalities (Boghetti, Billy King, Eleanor Roosevelt, Ickes, and Fisher). Because the quotations are documented in "Chapter Notes," the storytelling is not interrupted and produces a you-were-there observer's view. Scholars may question the lack of detailed documentation, but for the intended audience the documentation is appropriate. A selective bibliography discusses both scholarly sources and biographies for young readers, along with video and website sources. The discography enables readers to expand their enjoyment of this biography by finding recordings of this amazing contralto.