

*A Common Core State Anchor Standards-Aligned
Educator Guide for Grades 1 to 5*

Pigskins to Paintbrushes: The Story of Football-Playing Artist Ernie Barnes

About the book:

Young Ernie Barnes wasn't like other boys his age. Bullied for being shy, overweight, and uninterested in sports like boys were "supposed" to be, he instead took refuge in his sketchbook, in vibrant colors, bold brushstrokes, and flowing lines. But growing up in a poor, Black neighborhood during the 1930s, opportunities to learn about art were rare, and art museums were off-limits because of segregation laws. Discouraged and tired of being teased, Ernie joined the school football team. Although reluctant at first, he would soon become a star.

Publisher: Abrams Books for Young Readers

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Reading age: 6 - 10 years

Grade level: 1 - 5

About the Author/Illustrator - Don Tate:

Don Tate is an award-winning author, and the illustrator of numerous critically acclaimed books for children. He is also one of the founding hosts of the blog *The Brown Bookshelf* – a blog designed to push awareness of the myriad of African American voices writing for young readers, with book reviews, author and illustrator interviews. Don frequently speaks at schools, public libraries and writing conferences, and participates in book festivals.



Pre-Reading Discussion:

- Describe the setting depicted in this illustration. What are the men in the background doing?
- Consider the young man featured in the foreground. Describe his uniform. Make a connection between his uniform and the men in the background. How are they all related?
- Identify the objects the young man is holding in his hands. Determine what the paintbrushes suggest about the young man's interests.
- The word *biography* means the story of a person's life, adventures, and life history. This picture book, *PIGSKINS TO PAINTBRUSHES*, a biographical story. Predict what the story is going to be about. Identify elements in the illustration that serve as clues for your prediction.

Post-Reading Discussion:

Ernest never said much.

His artwork was his voice.

- The word *bottom* means lowest, underneath, and last. Examine what life must've been like living in a place called *The Bottom*. Discuss the impact *The Bottom* had upon Ernest as a child. Use examples from the story to support your claims.
- Describe Ernest's relationship with his mother.
- Why do you think Ernest "never said much"? Identify ways that he creatively communicated through his art. Who do you think understood his messages most clearly? How so?



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Post-Reading Discussion cont.:

At school, Ernest was a bully magnet. A boy who didn't play sports? Who loved art, played the trombone, and enjoyed reading poetry? He got teased for being different. "They hated me," he once said.

Over a prayer and a plate of fried chicken, she and the coach made a final decision: Ernest would become number seventy-three on the Hillside Hornets.

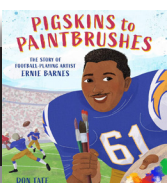
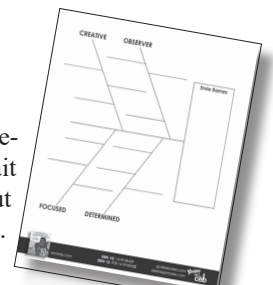
"Where are the paintings by Negro artists?" her asked the museum guide. "I'm afraid your people don't express themselves in this way," she said. Words as cold as ice. Words Ernest knew weren't true. Laws has changed. People's attitudes had not.

Ernie's paintings were dynamic. Light and shadows swirled. Lines and patterns sang. The raw muscle of football danced with the grace of a ballerina.

- Define what it means to be *different*. List ways that Ernest was different that the other kids living in The Bottom. Consider how being different benefitted Ernest as an adult.
- Artists are observers of life. They notice small details that others overlook. Explain how being different may have influenced Ernest's artistic observational skills later in life.
- The word *reassurance* means comfort, confidence, and encouraged. Make a connection between the word *reassurance* and the quote "When I was home and drawing, I was happy. I made friends with the lines." Explain how drawing offered Ernest comfort, confidence, and encouragement.
- Explain why his mother decided that Ernest would become a football player against his will, being fully aware of his earlier struggles with the game.
- The word *nurture* means to care for, educate, and develop. List ways that Ernest's mother nurtured his artistic abilities. Give reasons why she chose to nurture his athletic abilities, as well.
- Determine how playing football in high school became a turning point in Ernest's life.
- To *insinuate* means to suggest, imply, and to allude. Examine the quote, "I'm afraid your people don't express themselves in this way." What message was the museum guide *insinuating* in her comment to Ernest. Tell why Ernest knew her words were not true.
- Make a connection between the museum guide's words and the bullies of The Bottom. State the similarities and differences of both experiences.
- Explain how unfair insinuations and cruelty caused Ernest to become determined to become a skilled athlete and a master artist.
- The word *focused* means dedicated, purposeful, and persistent. Consider how *focused* Ernest had to be to create dynamic paintings with swirling shadows and patterns that sang. Identify key moments in his life that contributed to his abilities to focus on his art in this way.
- Ernest once said that "Football demands creativity." Does football require the same type of creativity that painting does? Explain your answer.
- Interpret the meaning of the last line in the book, "From pigskins to paintbrushes, Ernie Barnes grew to be a man successful at being himself." Tell how Ernie's story inspires you to do the same in your life.

Application - Cause & Effect Character Analysis:

Using the Cause & Effect Character Analysis template on the next page as a guide, examine ways that Ernie demonstrated the following character traits – being *creative*, *determined*, an *observer*, and *focused*. On the horizontal spaces placed on the diagonal lines, list examples of how he exhibited each trait in his actions or responses to events throughout his life. In the rectangular space to on the far left of the grid, identify which trait you feel best defines the man Ernie Barnes. List reasons why in the space provided. Write a short essay about how and why Ernie's character impacted both the artistic and athletic worlds. Share your work with the class.



Common Core State Anchor Standards Alignment

English Language Arts Standards for Reading: CCRA.R.1, 2, 3, 4, 10 English Language Arts Standards for Writing: CCRA.W.2, 4, 5, 10
English Language Arts Standards for Speaking and Listening: CCRA.SL.1, 2, 4, 6

Cause & Effect Character Analysis

