

# 110 GREAT SPEECHES FOR YOUNG AMERICANS

by  
Suzanne McIntire

## BOOK REVIEW

People who know that I am not, and never will be, a public speaker ask me "How did you ever get started collecting speeches?" For this rewarding hobby I have to thank my children's English teachers. In middle school, they were asked to bring in a speech to declaim, up to four minutes long, as part of the class speech festival. My oldest child waited until the last minute, of course, and I was embarrassed to find we didn't even have the Gettysburg Address at our house.

At the library, I discovered there was no compre-

The speeches cover almost 400 years of American eloquence, from Powhatan warning Capt. John Smith in 1609 to Senator Charles Robb on the meaning of the flag in 2001. There are founding fathers (as Sam Adams), abolitionists (Grimke), and suffragettes (Shaw). There are eulogies (RFK), inaugural addresses (JFK), surrender speeches (Black Hawk), and sermons (King). There is humor (Twain), sorrow (Cochise), and opposition (Mother Jones). For kids who need action, there are speeches before battle (Eisenhower), and by sports figures (Cal Ripken).

I'm also asked which are my favorites. As a reader who enormously enjoyed the research that went into this book, I love the less-well known jewels: Tecumseh pleading for help against the Americans; Archibald Cox defending pro-Vietnam War speakers from anti-war protesters; Pearl Buck's graduation speech to a segregated high school; Langston Hughes on being "black-listed;" Chaplain Gittlesohn's eulogy at the Marine Corps cemetery after the Battle of Iwo Jima; escaped slave Louis Richardson's triumphant speech on reaching Canada. I had

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hensive collection of speeches for young people. I dug through adult collections, finding delightful pieces here and there, but it appeared that short speeches, nonpolitical speeches, addresses by Native Americans and other minorities, and speeches by children themselves were mostly left out. Coincidentally I was reading Frederick Douglass' autobiography, and became intrigued by his references to a favorite book, *The Columbian Orator*, a children's book of oratory first published in 1798. This was the book he used as a young slave boy to teach himself to read and speak, and eventually become one of America's greatest orators. "Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book," he said. I resolved to create a new *Columbian Orator*, and I like to think this new book might serve the same purpose for some other young orator in middle or high school today.

I selected the 100 speeches to interest young people whenever possible. For instance, from Clarence Darrow's speeches I chose his defense of teenagers Leopold and Loeb, and I included the usually omitted section of LBJ's voting rights address in which he describes his experience teaching in a Mexican-American school. I used the close of Russell Conwell's "Acres of Diamonds," with his poignant Civil War account, as a teenage captain, of leading older men into battle and death.

always thought Americans were the strong, silent, inarticulate members of the English speaking world, and my research certainly proved me wrong!

An English teacher told me recently that her students had planned their classes' activity for Grandparents' Day. The children read speeches from the book while grannies and grandpas guessed the speaker. It was a classroom success, with only one speech going unidentified. I couldn't have been happier, not just that these short pieces of oratory brought generations together, but that so great has been the fruit of our country's freedom of speech that ordinary Americans are able to identify their national orators. I'm finishing up a similar book of speeches from around the world, contacting embassies and asking individuals about notable speeches from their countries, and you would not believe how many say their nation has no famous speech--this even from other Western democracies. I'll leave it to others to explain why this is, but count America lucky.

*(Suzanne McIntire is the editor of the "American Heritage Book of Great American Speeches for Young People" published by John Wiley & Sons with American Heritage, paperback, \$14.95. Available at bookstores, with discounts for bulk orders from the publisher at 800-225-5945.)*