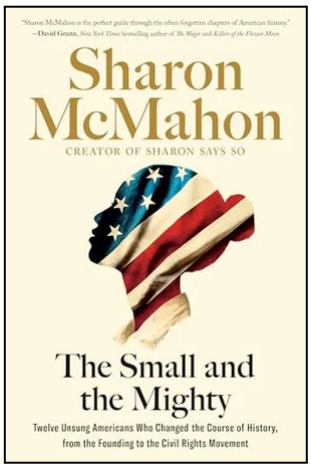
Wyoming High School: Summer "Mighty" Read 2026-2027

As America prepares to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, we have an opportunity to learn about the people and events that have shaped our country, many of whom are unknown. This summer's "mighty" read focuses on the question:
How can we recognize the contributions of unsung heroes?

All students entering grades 9-12 for the 2026-2027 school year must read this book.
You can find the book at your local library, on Amazon, and in local bookstores.
Please have the book read by August 20, 2026.

The Small and the Mighty: Twelve Unsung Americans Who Changed the Course of History, from the Founding to the Civil Rights Movement **by Sharon McMahon**



A #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

From America's favorite government teacher, a "fascinating and fun" (Adam Grant) portrait of twelve ordinary Americans whose courage formed the character of our country.

In *The Small and the Mighty*, Sharon McMahon proves that the most remarkable Americans are often ordinary people who didn't make it into the textbooks. Not the presidents, but the telephone operators. Not the aristocrats, but the schoolteachers. Through meticulous research, she discovers history's unsung characters and brings their rich, riveting stories to light for the first time.

You'll meet a woman astride a white horse riding down Pennsylvania Ave, a young boy detained at a Japanese incarceration camp, a formerly enslaved woman on a mission to reunite with her daughter, a poet on a train, and a teacher who learns to work with her enemies. More than one thing is bombed, and multiple people surprisingly become rich. Some rich with money, and some wealthy with things that matter more.

This is a book about what really made America – and Americans – great. McMahon's cast of improbable champions will become familiar friends, lighting the path we journey in our quest to make the world more just, peaceful, good, and free. (*Penguin Random House*)

The following are questions you should consider as you read the book. You should come to school ready to discuss these questions. You can annotate, use post-its, or record answers in a notebook. Consider using a graphic organizer to group individuals from different historical periods and record traits, jobs, and/or accomplishments.

Introduction: New York, 1804

1. **Civics/History:** According to the author, why is it vital for citizens to understand that history is made by "ordinary" people rather than just a few "famous" leaders? How does this shift in perspective change our understanding of what it means to be a patriot?
2. **English/Literary Analysis:** Analyze the characterization of Morris in the introduction. What specific details does the author use to describe his personality and his work? How does Morris serve as a symbol for the "Small and Mighty" topic that will follow in the rest of the book?

Angel of the Rockies (Chapters 1-3)

1. **Civics/History:** How does Clara Brown's journey from enslavement in Kentucky to becoming a community leader in Colorado challenge our traditional understanding of gender, race, and/or Westward Expansion?
2. **English/Literary Analysis:** How does McMahon use the narrative elements of setting and internal conflict to illustrate the emotional weight of Brown's lifelong search for her separated family?

The Next Needed Thing (Chapters 4 & 5)

1. **Civics/History:** In what ways did educators like Virginia Randolph and William James Edwards, along with philanthropists like Julius Rosenwald, overcome barriers to build schools and allow more people to get an education?

2. **English/Literary Analysis:** Analyze how McMahon explores the idea of "practical vs. academic education." How does the author characterize the different approaches taken by these educators to solve the same societal problem?

America the Beautiful (Chapters 6-8)

1. **Civics/History:** Katharine Lee Bates wrote "America the Beautiful" after traveling across the country. How does her famous poem reflect both the physical reality and the hopeful goals of America during the late 19th century?

2. **English/Literary Analysis:** How does the author blend biographical facts about Bates's personal life (and her long partnership with Katharine Coman) with the broader historical narrative of the era without losing the story's focus?

Forward Out of Darkness (Chapters 9-13)

1. **Civics/History:** How did geographic location (specifically the American West, where Rebecca Brown Mitchell and Maria de Lopez worked) play a critical but often overlooked role in the success of the women's suffrage movement?

2. **English/Literary Analysis:** Inez Milholland is famously remembered for leading a 1913 parade on a white horse. How does McMahon use this striking imagery to discuss the role of "optics" and public relations in political movements?

An Orientation of the Spirit (Chapters 14-17)

1. **Civics/History:** How did wealthy donors and local community leaders work together to change the American education system? How did the partnership between Julius Rosenwald and Booker T. Washington help overcome unfair laws in the South, and what does this show about how regular people can help protect the rights of others?

2. **English/Literary Analysis:** Throughout these chapters, McMahon explores the "spirit" of service and the idea of "lifting as we climb." How does the author use the different life stories of these four individuals to build a cohesive narrative about the power of collective action, and how do their varying backgrounds (from a wealthy Philadelphia Quaker to a man born into enslavement) add layers to the book's central idea of unsung heroes?

Go for Broke (Chapters 18-21)

1. **Civics/History:** How do the stories of Daniel Inouye and Norman Mineta highlight the devastating tension between constitutional rights and national panic during wartime?

2. **English/Literary Analysis:** What narrative techniques does McMahon use to convey the profound internal conflict these young men faced when choosing to serve a country that had incarcerated their own families?

Momentum (Chapters 22-26)

1. **Civics/History:** Why is Claudette Colvin's act of resistance on a Montgomery bus often overshadowed by Rosa Parks' story that is told in traditional textbooks? What does this reveal about how "official" historical narratives are created?

2. **English/Literary Analysis:** Septima Clark fundamentally believed that literacy was linked to freedom. How does McMahon develop this idea of "reading as rebellion" throughout the final chapters of the book?

Conclusion & Reflective Questions

1. **Civics/History:** Based on the twelve individuals featured in this book, what do you think it means to be a patriot?

2. **English/Literary Analysis:** How does McMahon's choice to focus on "micro-narratives" (the stories of everyday people) change the way we read and understand "macro-history" (wars, presidents, and laws)?

3. **Text to Self:** From all the readings, who stands out to you in some way? Maybe it's the person whom you identify with, or the person who had qualities you admired most. Explain.

4. **Synthesis**: From all the readings, what characteristics do these unsung heroes share? Provide examples to support your answer. (Example traits: caring, hopeful, determined, brave, etc.)