



Media Education

# RBG

A FILM BY BETSY WEST AND JULIE COHEN



## Educator Study Guide

🔥 Film Spark Volume 3

# RBG



## THE FILMMAKERS

**Betsy West** is an award-winning filmmaker, journalist and educator. A producer and executive for over two decades at ABC News, West received 21 Emmy® Awards and two duPont-Columbia Awards for her work on “Nightline,” “PrimeTimeLive,” and the documentary program “Turning Point,” where she served as Executive Producer. As Senior Vice President at CBS News from 1998–2005, she oversaw “60 Minutes” and “48 Hours,” and was the executive in charge of the CBS documentary 9/11, winner of the Primetime Emmy® Award in 2002.

**Julie Cohen** has directed and produced eight feature documentaries, including *The Sturgeon Queens*, which screened at the 2015 Berlin International Film Festival, and 60 others, subsequently winning 10 Audience Choice Awards. She has also directed and produced *American Veteran*, which screened at 20 festivals and won the 2017 Panavision Showcase Award for New York filmmakers. Add to that list *I Live to Sing* (WNET), which won the 2014 New York Emmy® Award for Best Arts Program, one of three New York Emmys® she has won since 2012.

<b>RUNTIME</b>	97 minutes
<b>COUNTRY OF ORIGIN</b>	U.S.A.
<b>RATING</b>	Rated PG for some thematic elements and language
<b>GRADES</b>	6 and higher



## ABOUT THE FILM

At the time of her death on September 18, 2020 at age 87, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg had developed a lengthy legal legacy while becoming an unexpected pop-culture icon. But the unique personal journey of her rise to the nation’s highest court had been largely unknown, even to some of her biggest fans. *RBG* explores Ginsburg’s life and career.

## KEY THEMES

- Gender Discrimination
- Role of the Supreme Court
- Equal Protection Under the Law
- Challenging the Status Quo

“ *Ruth Bader Ginsburg quite literally changed the way the world is for American women.* ”  
 –Nina Totenberg

## PRESCREENING DISCUSSION

- » What is your definition of what it means to be a “lady?”
- » Who is a hero to you, or whom do you look up to? What admirable qualities do they have?
- » What do you know about the U.S. Supreme Court? Can you name any of the current Supreme Court justices?
- » Are you aware of any Supreme Court cases that have impacted your life? If so, share.
- » Where do you see inequality and discrimination in our society today? How does our society address discriminatory behavior?
- » Who are some of the most prominent figures in U.S. history advocating for equality?



## KEY TERMS, CONCEPTS, AND ISSUES

**Supreme Court of the United States**—The highest court in the United States of America. At capacity, there are nine judges (called justices) on the court, and they serve for life. The Supreme Court chooses which cases it will decide on and is responsible for upholding the Constitution. Supreme Court judges are appointed by the President, confirmed by a majority vote of the Senate, and serve a lifelong tenure on the court.

**Dissenting Opinion**—An opinion in a legal case written by one or more judges expressing disagreement with the majority opinion of the court.

**Justice Thurgood Marshall**—Marshall was a justice of the Supreme Court of the United States from October 1967 until October 1991. The grandson of a slave, he was also the Court’s first African-American justice.

**14th Amendment**—Adopted in 1868, the 14th Amendment addresses citizenship rights and equal protection of the laws, and was proposed in response to issues related to former slaves following the American Civil War.

**Gloria Steinem**—Gloria Marie Steinem is an American feminist, journalist, and social political activist who became nationally recognized as a leader and a spokeswoman for the American feminist movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

**Notorious B.I.G.**—Christopher Wallace was widely considered to be one of the best rappers of all time. His talent, controversial life, and untimely death have led to his image becoming a recognized cultural icon.

## CREATING CRITICAL VIEWERS

**W**e live in a media-saturated world, and students are constantly surrounded by an array of constructed messages. Media literacy skills (the who, how, and why behind media creation) are essential for students to be informed citizens—to navigate and make sense of their world successfully.

If students can be trained to view media through a more discerning lens, not only will they become more productive community members, but they will also be more empowered consumers and critical thinkers. Prefacing each screening with this series of questions can help create a more active viewing environment and result in enhanced media literacy for your students.

**Medium**—How was this film constructed, and how was its story told? What did you see? What did you hear?

**Purpose**—What motivated the creation of this film? Do you think the purpose was achieved?

**Subject**—What information, values, ideas and emotions are presented in the film?

**Point of View (POV)**—Who created this film? What is their perspective?

**Audience**—Who is the target audience? How did the film make you feel? How do you think it made others feel?

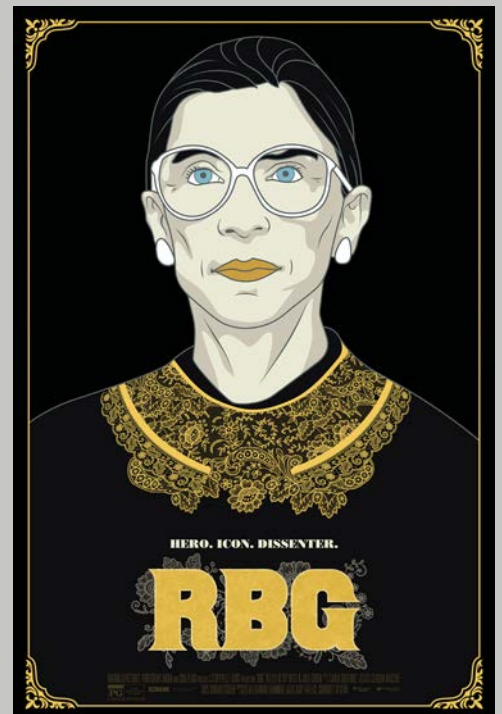
## DECONSTRUCTING THE STORY

- » The film opens with opera music playing as we see images of famous male politicians immortalized as statues in the U.S. Capitol. During the scene, we also hear the voices of male pundits and politicians slandering Ruth Bader Ginsburg, calling her a witch and a zombie. The next sequence takes us to an 80-plus-year-old Ginsburg working out in the gym to the song “Bullpen,” with lyrics like, “There’s a china doll in the bullpen.” Discuss the significance of the film’s beginning and how it sets the stage for the rest of the film.
- » American society was much different when Ruth Bader Ginsburg was growing up. Explain what was different then. What similarities still exist?
- » How did the challenges of motherhood, taking care of an ailing husband, and getting through law school prepare Ginsburg for her career?
- » When speaking of Justice Ginsburg’s husband, Marty, a friend described him as being okay playing “second fiddle.” What does she mean by this, and what examples support this statement?
- » The film mentions that Justice Ginsburg captured for male members of the court what it was like to be a second-class citizen. Which featured legal cases in the documentary demonstrate this stark gender discrimination, and what issues do they address? Did she only argue on behalf of women’s inequality?
- » Why is Ruth Bader Ginsburg considered a trailblazer? What are some of the greatest barriers she has overcome?

“ *The law is a consuming love for me.*  
—Justice Ginsburg ”

## MAKING THE FILM

- » Justice Ginsburg is an elderly woman described as a serious, reserved figure. How do the filmmakers make her a relatable character?
- » On several occasions, the filmmakers interviewed two people at the same time: her biographers, her childhood friends, her own children. How does the interplay between the two interviewees contribute to the viewing experience?
- » No one is allowed to film inside the Supreme Court, so the filmmakers chose to use the audio recordings of the hearings as text on the screen overlaid on shots from inside an empty courtroom. Do you find this an effective technique by the filmmaker? Why?
- » In addition to tracing the professional life of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the filmmaker also captures the personal life of the Judge. How was this done? Was it successful?



## CRITICAL RESPONSE

- » Ruth Bader Ginsburg has written a number of dissenting opinions in recent years. What purpose do these serve?
- » Ruth's mother was a big influence on her life. She told Ruth to always be a lady, which meant not allowing herself to be overcome by "useless emotions" like anger. In what ways did she live up to her mother's definition of being a lady? How did this film change your definition of what it means to be a lady?
- » Justice Scalia and Justice Ginsburg were good friends, but had starkly different perspectives about how to interpret the Constitution. How did their perspectives differ?
- » Justice Ginsburg is known as a liberal Supreme Court judge, but the documentary mentions that she is also someone who often strives to build consensus, look for common ground, and is willing to concede and make compromises. How does this compare to the political climate of today?
- » Near the end of the film, Ginsburg appears in an opera and recites lines she has written herself as the Duchess of Krakenthorpe. Interpret this allegory in light of the political events of the time.



- » The President of the United States gets to nominate Supreme Court Justices to their lifelong positions. How can one president thus affect a generation of legal outcomes and precedents? Is this a fair process?
- » When the Supreme Court voted to overturn the 1965 Voting Rights act, Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote a dissenting opinion stating that race-based voting discrimination still exists, and that the Supreme Court's decision is like "throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet." What did she mean by this?

“ *I did think of myself as a kind of kindergarten teacher in those days because the judges didn't think sex discrimination existed.* ”  
 —Justice Ginsburg

## HANDS-ON ACTIVITIES

- » Create a book study group, and collectively read and discuss one of the two books mentioned in the film, *You Can't Spell Truth Without Ruth* or *Notorious RBG: the Life and Times of Ruth Bader Ginsburg (Young Readers' Edition)*.
- » **Making Art:** In honor of the "ferocious defender of women and minorities," create some original artwork depicting what the Notorious RBG means to you. Visit the numerous social media sites celebrating her life and legacy for inspiration and to contribute to the conversation at: #notoriousrbg, @notoriousRBG, and notoriousrbg.tumblr.com.
- » **Making Art:** Ginsburg is a rare government official who has also become a pop icon, inspiring many people with her determination, integrity, and dedication to fairness under the law. Research another political figure who has reached this status, and create a slogan and logo in the vein of 'Notorious RBG.'
- » **Making Art:** Inspired by the various collars worn by Justice Ginsburg atop her legal robe, design and make your own Supreme Court Justice robe collar.
- » **Making Media:** Ginsburg is one of nine Supreme Court Justices running our country's highest court. Choose another one of the eight justices and create a presentation about this judge and some of the key cases that have been critical in defining their court legacy.

## MORE INFORMATION

### TO READ

My Own Words

Ruth Bader Ginsburg, with Mary Hartnett and Wendy W. Williams

Official guide to the Supreme Court – includes justice bios, history, traditions, and FAQs  
[supremecourt.gov/about/about.aspx](https://supremecourt.gov/about/about.aspx)

National Women's History Museum – lesson plans, online exhibits, biographies, posters  
[womenshistory.org](https://www.womenshistory.org)

### TO WATCH

*He Named Me Malala*

Directed by Davis Guggenheim

*Mr. Civil Rights: Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP*

Directed by Mick Caouette

*Wonder Women! The Untold Story of American Superheroines*

Directed by Kristy Guevara-Flanagan

## FILM NEWS AND UPDATES

“Ruth Bader Ginsburg talks about her run-ins with sexual harassers, those ‘Gins-burn’ sketches and her feelings about Sundance’s ‘RBG’ documentary premiere”

Written by Sean P. Means

[sfltrib.com/artsliving/movies/2018/01/21/ruth-bader-ginsburg-talks-about-her-run-ins-with-sexual-harassers-dreams-of-singing-opera-and-those-gins-burn-sketches-during-sundance-appearance](https://sfltrib.com/artsliving/movies/2018/01/21/ruth-bader-ginsburg-talks-about-her-run-ins-with-sexual-harassers-dreams-of-singing-opera-and-those-gins-burn-sketches-during-sundance-appearance)

## TAKE ACTION!

National Organization for Women's National Action Campaign

[now.org/nap](https://now.org/nap)



“ *She is the closest thing to a superhero that I know.*  
 –Gloria Steinem ”

## RELEVANT UTAH AND NATIONAL CURRICULUM STANDARDS

Due to Study Guide space constraints, the following standards only include main “Anchor” and “Strand” Standards. For a complete list of detailed supporting Sub-standards and Objectives, please visit the website: [utahfilmcenter.org/filmspark](http://utahfilmcenter.org/filmspark).

### UTAH FINE ARTS CORE STANDARDS— SECONDARY MEDIA ARTS

#### Anchor Standards (grades 7–8)

**Respond**—Students will perceive and analyze artistic work and process. They will interpret intent and meaning, and apply criteria to evaluate artistic work and process.

**Connect**—Students will synthesize and relate knowledge from personal and collaborative experience to make and receive art. They will relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

#### Anchor Standards (grades 9–12)

There are three “Levels” and Anchor Standards of “Respond” and “Connect” are identical throughout each Level, but with differing sub-standards by ability.

#### LEVEL ONE

**Respond**—Students will understand, evaluate, and articulate how works of art convey meaning for the observer as well as the creator.

**Connect**—Student will relate artistic skills, ideas, and work with personal meaning and external context.

### UTAH CORE STATE STANDARDS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS— SECONDARY

#### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening Comprehension and Collaboration

1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
2. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
3. Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

### UTAH STANDARDS FOR LIBRARY MEDIA—SECONDARY

#### Strand II Literacy: Information and Research

Students need the lifelong skills of selecting information from a wide variety of sources, assessing its worth, and applying newfound knowledge to problems, preparing them for learning, doing, and problem solving in college, career and throughout life. Teacher librarians will instruct students in a multi-step research process that is adaptable. As students gain research skills, they develop self-confidence in solving information problems in an environment where information resources and technologies have become increasingly complex.

**Standard 4**—Students will engage with and extract information.

#### Strand III Literacy: Media Engagement

In order to make informed decisions, students must successfully discern and interpret the messages surrounding them in media. Teacher librarians, in collaboration with classroom teachers, can integrate these skills into curricular units throughout a wide range of core and elective subjects.

**Standard 1**—Students will demonstrate that media literacy is a life skill integral to modern citizenship and informed decision-making.

### NATIONAL FILM STUDY STANDARDS FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL BY THE FILM FOUNDATION

Standard 1.0—Film Language

Standard 2.0—Historical and Cultural Contexts

Standard 3.0—Production and Creative Expression

Standard 4.0—Viewers’ Response and Aesthetic Valuing

Standard 5.0—Cross-Curricular Connections



## About Film Spark

Documentary films are powerful, multi-sensory experiences that help students build social and emotional awareness and connect to current events, cultures, social and political issues, and beliefs beyond their own. The Film Spark documentaries, paired with standards-linked educator study guides, serve grades 6-12 and are curated to support the development of communication, critical thinking, media literacy, social action and media creation. Each Film Spark volume consists of 12 documentaries that help build understanding and empathy and showcase new voices and topics relevant to young people today. Ultimately, the Film Spark program helps lead young people to develop their own voices and become more successful students and productive citizens.



Curated Film • Media Education • Artist Support  
[WWW.UTAHFILMCENTER.ORG](http://WWW.UTAHFILMCENTER.ORG)