



**Classroom Guide for
THE SECRET TO FREEDOM**
Written by **Marcia Vaughan**
Illustrated by **Larry Johnson**

Reading Level

*Reading Level: Grades 2–3

Interest Level: Grades 1–5

Guided Reading Level: M

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 3.7/5

Lexile™ Measure: 520

Themes

Courage, Family Ties, Slavery/Civil War/Underground Railroad, Communication, Quilting, African American Interest

Synopsis

Great Aunt Lucy tells her grandniece the story of an old quilt square which symbolizes an important role played by quilts in alerting slaves about escape plans during the pre Civil War years. Lucy's brother brings home some quilts from another plantation where he has been on loan. He explains how each quilt pattern has a special meaning for slaves planning to escape on the Underground Railroad. For example the monkey wrench pattern means "collect tools needed" and the wagon wheel pattern means "pack belongings". Whenever an escape is to take place, Lucy hangs out the quilt indicated by her brother. He then leads the runaways to where their journey will begin. When Albert is caught off the plantation and whipped one night, he knows he too will have to run. Lucy remains behind knowing that she would only slow down her brother because she is lame, but she gives her brother a quilt square with a bright yellow star on it for good luck. Many years later, after the war is over, Lucy receives the quilt scrap in the mail and learns that her brother is alive and well and coming to visit her.

Background

The Underground Railroad was a covert system of trails, people, and safe houses that helped slaves escape during the years 1804 to 1865 when slavery was abolished. More than 75,000 fugitives made their way from southern plantations to states in the North or to Canada. The runaways were known as “passengers,” the guides were called “conductors,” the safe houses were “stations,” and those who hid the slaves in their homes were “stationmasters.” Since most slaves did not know how to read or write, and few had ever been off the plantation, a system of codes and secret signals was used to pass along information needed by the fugitives. Among these signs were specific quilt patterns. The quilts were hung outside on railings to convey their messages. See the Author’s Note at the end of this guide for information about the meanings of the most important quilt patterns. The patterns are also pictured on the back cover of the book.

BEFORE READING**Prereading Focus Questions**

Before introducing the book, you may wish to have students discuss one or more of the following questions as a motivation for reading.

1. What is a quilt? Who makes quilts? How are quilts different from other bed coverings?
2. How can you communicate without using words?
3. What is a code? Why are codes secret? When do people use codes?
4. What does it mean to be brave? What is the bravest thing you have ever done? Why did you do it?
5. What does the word “freedom” mean to you? How would you feel if you did not have the freedoms that you do?

Teaching Tip

You may wish to feature *THE SECRET TO FREEDOM* as part of your celebration of Black History Month in February, or as part of a unit on slavery.

Exploring the Book

Write the book title on the board. Ask students: What is freedom? Why do you think there is a secret to it in this story?

Display the book and invite students to examine the cover illustration. Ask students what they think is the girl holding. What might that have to do with freedom? Who are the people in the background?

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Ask students to read to find out what the secret is in this story, and how it relates to freedom.

VOCABULARY

Write the following birthday-related words from the book on the chalkboard. Challenge students to think of different ways to sort the words. For example: food, things to do at a party, kinds of celebrations. Encourage students to add other words to each category. Then have students take turns using the words in their own sentences.

great aunt
overseer
mistress
patroller

seamstress
slave trader
slave
sharecropper

blacksmith
master
runaway
mailman

READING AND RESPONDING

Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to help guide their understanding of the book. Encourage students to refer to passages in the book to support their responses.

1. Who is telling the story in the beginning of the book? Who tells most of the story? Why do you think the narrator changes?
2. What kinds of work did Great Aunt Lucy's mother, father, and brother do on the plantation?
3. Why did Lucy's parents leave?
4. How did Albert find out about the Underground Railroad?
5. Why were the quilts important?
6. How did Albert help the runaways? Why did he end up running away too? What dangers did the runaways face?
7. Why didn't Lucy leave with her brother? What do you think this shows about Lucy?
8. Why did Lucy give Albert a quilt square? What was its significance?
9. How did Lucy's life change after the Civil War? How did her life stay the same?
10. How did Lucy learn that Albert was still alive? How do you think she felt after learning the news?

Literature Circles

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in developing the roles of the circle members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to those in the Discussion Questions section of this guide to help group members explore the book.

- The **Passage Locator** might look for passages that relate to Lucy's feelings at different points in the story.
- The **Illustrator** might draw scenes of Albert's escape.
- The **Connector** might find out about the meanings of other quilts.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion points for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might find out about other stories of escape by slaves in the South before the Civil War. For example, they might learn about the journeys of Harriet Tubman, who escaped in 1849 and then returned to lead many others to freedom after that.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: **GETTING STARTED WITH LITERATURE CIRCLES** by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), **LITERATURE CIRCLES: VOICE AND CHOICE IN BOOK CLUBS AND READING GROUPS** by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and **LITERATURE CIRCLES RESOURCE GUIDE** by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

Reader's Response

Use the following questions or similar ones to help students practice active reading and personalize what they have read. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals or in oral discussion.

1. Would you have dared to act as Albert did? Would you have stayed behind as Lucy did? Why or why not?
2. What did you learn about slavery in this book? What did you learn about the Underground Railroad?
3. Why do you think Lucy worked so hard to learn to read and then spent time teaching others?
4. Why were the quilts a good way to communicate information? How else might slaves have given secret messages to one another?

Other Writing Activities

You may wish to have students participate in one or more of the following writing activities. Set aside time for them to share and discuss their work.

1. Albert sends the quilt square and a letter to Lucy after the war. Imagine that you are Lucy. Write a letter back to Albert.
2. Make up a code with a friend. Write something in your code. Then see if classmates can read or "break" it.
3. Challenge students to retell the story of **THE SECRET TO FREEDOM** from the point of view of Albert.

ELL (ESL) Teaching Strategies

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. Preteach key vocabulary to help keep English language learners focused on the story. Post these essential key words in the classroom where students can access them easily.
2. Record a reading of the story on an audiocassette or CD. Allow students to listen to the recording as they follow along in the book.
3. Model how to use the illustrations to enhance the meaning of the text. As you read aloud, comment on how an illustration provides clues to the words.
4. Have students write or dictate questions about the book. Set aside time to help students explore these queries.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

Social Studies

1. Provide a map of the various routes used by escaping slaves on the Underground Railroad. Help students identify places along the routes.
2. Help students research the Underground Railroad. They will find many useful resources on the Internet including the Web site of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio (www.freedomcenter.org).
3. Students might also learn more about plantation life before the Civil War and explore why this way of life was so dependent on slavery.

Language Arts

Write these similes from the book on the chalkboard. Teach students that a simile is a figure of speech that compares two unlike things using the words *like* or *as*. Then have students identify the two things being compared in each simile.

- My back ached like an old mule's.
- That brother of mine was wily as a fox.
- Albert would steal away quiet as a cat.
- Lucy's heart thundered like a drum.

Science

Explain that the fugitive slaves traveled at night through fields, woods, and swamps to avoid detection. The North Star served as a guide on clear nights. The North Star, also known as Polaris, is the last star in the handle of the Little Dipper. Help students identify this constellation, as well as the Big Dipper, on a star map. They may also wish to try finding these constellations in the sky on a clear night.

Art

Encourage students to study the patchwork quilt patterns shown on the back cover of the book and read about the meaning of each. Then challenge them to design their own patterns that convey “secret” messages.

Music

Have students learn the words to the song “Follow the Drinking Gourd.” Then help students decode the song to find the directions to freedom. You might also introduce two other songs used by fugitives: “Chariot’s a Coming” was sung to announce the arrival of a conductor (guide) on the Underground Railroad, and “Good News Neighbor” was sung to report the safe arrival of a fugitive in free territory.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In the years before the Civil War began in 1861, the Underground Railroad helped more than 75,000 slaves reach freedom. The Underground Railroad was not actually a railroad, and it did not go underground. It was a secret system of pathways and trails that guided escaping slaves from Southern plantations to the Northern states and Canada where slavery was illegal.

Members of the Underground Railroad were black and white, male and female, free citizens, slaves, and former slaves who had gained their freedom. Runaway slaves were called “passengers,” while those who guided them along the way were called “conductors.” “Stationmasters” were people who hid the runaways in their homes or other safe buildings called “stations.”

Most slaves had never set foot off their plantations and knew little about the North or how to reach it. Because of this, signs, symbols, and codes were used to transmit important information to slaves planning to escape on the Underground Railroad. Common quilt patterns made up one of these codes. The quilts could be hung out to air without being noticed by the plantation owner, yet for slaves who knew the code, the quilt patterns told them how to plan and carry out their escape.

The most important quilt patterns in the Underground Railroad code are described below. There are also pictures of them on the back cover of the book.

- The **monkey wrench** pattern alerted slaves to gather the tools and supplies they would need when they escaped.
- The **wagon wheel** pattern told slaves to pack their belongings and provisions to help them survive their journey.
- The **tumbling blocks** pattern announced that it was time to escape.
- The **bear’s paw** pattern instructed runaways to follow the bear tracks through the mountains, staying away from roads.
- The **crossroads** pattern directed escaping slaves to travel to Cleveland, Ohio, the major crossroad to Canada.
- The **log cabin** pattern indicated stations where runaways were hidden along the way.
- The **shoofly** pattern referred to the conductors who guided slaves north on the Underground Railroad.
- The **bow tie** pattern told slaves to dress in better clothing and disguises so they would not stand out.
- The **flying geese** pattern instructed runaways to follow the migrating geese north in spring.
- The **drunkard’s path** pattern told escaping slaves to move in a crooked or zigzag path, avoiding major roads.

- The **star** pattern advised runaways to use the stars and constellations as a map to locating the North Star, a guiding light to freedom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcia Vaughan is a full-time writer and former librarian who began writing out of her love of reading. She says, "I loved reading other authors' books and thought I'd like to try writing them, too!" Since then, Vaughan has written more than eighty-five books for children. These include UP THE LEARNING TREE published by Lee & Low Books, as well as award winners such as WHISTLING DIXIE, WOMBAT STEW, and SNAP!

The idea for THE SECRET TO FREEDOM came to Vaughan while channel surfing on her TV with the sound off. She saw an elderly black woman sitting with a young girl at a table and began to imagine they were talking about the woman's past. Drawing on her recent reading about slavery and the Underground Railroad, Vaughan imagined "the woman revealing an amazing secret from her childhood in the days of slavery." Vaughan and her family live in Vashon Island, Washington.

THE SECRET TO FREEDOM is a powerful and touching story that has won many awards and honors. It is included on the Anti-Defamation League's Close the Book on Hate reading list. The book was also named a Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People and cited for Outstanding Merit, Best Children's Books of the Year by Bank Street College.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Larry Johnson was born in Boston and attended the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts. He has worked as an editorial cartoonist for the BOSTON GLOBE. He has also worked for THE NATIONAL SPORTS DAILY and now serves as co-host of a weekend sports radio show and as a Youth Minister at a Baptist church. Johnson's other children's books include SINGING WITH MOMMA LOU, published by Lee & Low and selected as a Best Children's Book of the Year by Bank Street College, KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE, and WHEN JO LOUIS WON THE TITLE. Johnson and his wife live in Stoughton, Massachusetts.

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

For the latest reviews and awards related to **THE SECRET TO FREEDOM** visit:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/books/secret.html> (English edition)

<http://www.leeandlow.com/order>

View other **Active Reader Classroom Guides** at:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/teachers>

Book Information

\$7.95, PAPERBACK

ISBN: 1-58430-251-8

\$16.95, HARDCOVER

ISBN 1-58430-021-3

32 PAGES, 8 3/8 X 10 5/8

Interest Level: Grades 1-5

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(Reading level based on the Spache Readability formula)

Themes: Underground Railroad, Slavery, Quilting, African American interest
Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 3.7/5
Lexile™ Measure: 520

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