
FOLLOW THE DRINKING GOURD

Author: Jeanette Winter

Publisher: Random House

THEME:

Slavery songs lifted spirits, boosted hopes and sometimes had hidden messages that helped slaves find their way to freedom.

PROGRAM SUMMARY:

Runaway slaves journey north along the Under-ground Railroad by following directions in a song, “The Drinking Gourd.”

LeVar celebrates the road to freedom paved by the Underground Railroad, introducing viewers to the history, heroes, stories and music of the African American culture that emerged from slavery. An a cappella group, Sweet Honey In The Rock, perform and share their historical knowledge of slavery.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION:

Before viewing the program, discuss with students their ideas about “freedom.” What is it? Who has it? Why is it important? Under what circumstances might people lose their freedom?

Before viewing the program, discuss the students’ concept of slavery—what they know about the lives of slaves, what they did, and what they were not allowed to do.

In the program, there are *re-creations* of slaves on the ship and the life of slaves on a plantation. Discuss the difference between re-creations and film of actual happenings.

LeVar explained the Underground Railroad, not as a conventional railroad with a train on a track, but as a way for slaves to travel from one safe house to another on their way to Canada or to states where slavery was illegal. Discuss with students why the railroad metaphor was an appropriate description.

Much of the program is devoted to music. Discuss with students why music had an important role in the lives of slaves. Why is music important in all our lives?

CURRICULUM EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

The book, *Follow the Drinking Gourd*, has the musical score at the end. With the assistance of the music teacher, have the class learn the song. Students might also enjoy learning “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing,” the song that is referred

to as the “African American National Anthem,” with words by James Weldon Johnson and lyrics by his brother J. Rosamond Johnson. Two excellent picture book versions of this song are: *Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing*, illustrated by Jan Spivey Gilchrist (Scholastic) and *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, illustrated by Elizabeth Catlett (Walker Publishing). Both versions contain the musical score.

On a map of the United States, locate the southern states from which slaves escaped, the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, and the states where the vast network of the Underground Railroad was located. (Several books recommended in the “Supplementary Booklist” contain maps.)

Harriet Tubman was an African-American woman who was a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad. She made repeated trips to guide slaves to freedom. Other African-Americans, born as slaves, made significant contributions on behalf of slaves and to American history in general (e.g., Phillis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Crispus Attucks, Nat Turner, Anthony Burns, Dred Scott, and others). Working in small cooperative groups, have students research the lives and accomplishments of these individuals.

Although the 13th Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery in 1865, African Americans have faced issues of equality and “color barriers” to the present day. Have students work in small groups and research some of the individuals since that time who have made notable contributions in government, the arts, literature, sports, religion, science, and other areas. Possible subjects include: Langston Hughes, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Marian Anderson, Bessie Coleman, Madame C.J. Walker, Bessie Smith, Zora Neale Hurston, Mary McLeod Bethune, Jackie Robinson, Louis Armstrong, W.E.B. DuBois, William H. Johnson, and many others.

Make a timeline of African American history. Place individuals that the students have researched on the timeline, as well as specific events such as the Emancipation Proclamation and the passage of the 13th Amendment, and general time frames for the bulk of the slave trade and activity on the Underground Railroad.

Since slaves were typically not allowed to learn to read and write, storytelling was an important means of communication. Many of the stories were about gaining freedom and involved the symbol of flying; others were the animal tales (e.g., the “Uncle Remus” stories). Locate some of these stories to read (or tell) to students. *The People Could Fly* by Virginia Hamilton (Knopf) is a useful collection.

Revisit the book so that students can examine the illustrations. Look for the Big Dipper and Peg Leg Joe’s special mark that he left for escaping slaves to find. Use this opportunity to provide some background to the Underground

Railroad activities. Discuss what might happen to people who assisted runaway slaves (Fugitive Slave Law). Help students understand that escaped slaves were not safe even in the northern states. In the program, it was mentioned that slaves looked for a lighted lamp in the window of a “station” to determine if it was safe to approach the house. Discuss why it was necessary to light a lamp. Include in the discussion why students think that there were so many people who wanted to help runaway slaves. (Raymond Bial’s *The Underground Railroad* is a useful resource.)

RELATED THEMES:

civil rights
Abraham Lincoln
African American history

RELATED READING RAINBOW PROGRAMS:

Program #81 — Tar Beach
Program #91 — Amazing Grace
Program #55 — Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Jeanette Winter is the author/illustrator of numerous books for children that include biographical fiction, retellings of folktales, and stories from many cultures. She found the inspiration for *Follow the Drinking Gourd* in slave narratives and a folksong. She makes her home in Texas.

BOOKS REVIEWED BY CHILDREN:

SHAKE IT TO THE ONE THAT YOU LOVE THE BEST: PLAY SONGS AND LULLABIES FROM BLACK MUSICAL TRADITIONS
collected and adapted by Cheryl Warren Mattox, illus. from the works of Vernetta P. Honeywood and Brenda Joysmith (Warren-Mattox Prod.)

A PICTURE BOOK OF HARRIET TUBMAN
by David A. Adler, illus. by Samuel Byrd (Holiday House)

SWEET CLARA AND THE FREEDOM QUILT
by Deborah Hopkinson, illus. by James Ransome (Random House)

SUPPLEMENTARY BOOKLIST:

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD
by Raymond Bial (Houghton Mifflin)

BAREFOOT: ESCAPE ON THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD
by Pamela Duncan Edwards, illus. by Henry Cole (HarperCollins)

MANY THOUSAND GONE: AFRICAN AMERICANS FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM

by Virginia Hamilton, illus. by Leo & Diane Dillon (Alfred A. Knopf)

NOW LET ME FLY: THE STORY OF A SLAVE FAMILY

by Dolores Johnson (Macmillan)

SEMINOLE DIARY: REMEMBRANCES OF A SLAVE

by Dolores Johnson (Macmillan)

THE FREEDOM RIDDLE

by Angela Shelf Medearis, illus. by John Ward (Lodestar)

FREDERICK DOUGLASS: THE LAST DAY OF SLAVERY

by William Miller, illus. by Cedric Lucas (Lee & Low Books)

AUNT HARRIET’S UNDERGROUND RAILROAD IN THE SKY

by Faith Ringgold (Crown)

A PLACE CALLED FREEDOM

by Scott Russell Sanders, illus. by Thomas B. Allen (Atheneum)

MINTY: A STORY OF YOUNG HARRIET TUBMAN

by Alan Schroeder, illus. by Jerry Pinkney (Dial)

NETTIE’S TRIP SOUTH

by Ann Turner, illus. by Ronald Himler (Macmillan)

JOURNEY TO FREEDOM: A STORY OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

by Courtnei C. Wright, illus. by Gershon Griffith (Holiday House)

