

# Ben Short Guide

## Ben by Julius Lester

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## Overview

"Ben" is one of Lester's most complicated and challenging stories. It is narrated in the first person by a white Chicago lawyer who, through his father's legal practice, has dealings with Southern slave owners. The narrator, as a young man, abhors slavery and envisions himself doing gallant deeds to free slaves, but he soon discovers his hypocrisy and weakness; he does nothing to help slaves during his travels through slave states. The story develops his deluded confusion about race relations and the vexed subject of slavery by having him fall in love with the daughter of a tobacco plantation owner. He discovers that in order to marry her he must take over the plantation and its two hundred fifty slaves. This tears at him, at least initially.

The narrator's father is furious when he learns that his son may forgo an advantageous marriage just because he does not want to own slaves.

He says, "When you actually see niggers, you'll realize what a favor we're doing them by keeping them as slaves." The narrator wrestles with his conscience, eventually resolving to go through with the marriage in spite of his doubts: "Nonetheless, as low as they were on the human scale, I couldn't shake the feeling that they, too, were human." This is an uncompromising, emotionally wrenching short story that permits none of its characters to be untainted by the moral compromises slavery entails; no character is allowed to be a hero or a villain.

## About the Author

Julius Lester is a best-selling author of books for both young people and young adults. He was born in St. Louis on January 27, 1939, and he grew up amidst the African-American traditions that form the basis for much of his work. He wrote *To Be a Slave* (1968; see separate entry, Vol. 3), his first book for young adults, at the suggestion of an editor. This nonfiction work is an account of the lives of American slaves which attempts to fill some gaps in American history as taught in America's schools. The book became a best seller and attracted a worldwide audience. It was a 1969 Newbery Honor Book. Much of Lester's subsequent writing for young adults has focused on African-American folktales, but the stories of *Long Journey Home* (of which "Ben" is one) are inspired by factual accounts of the African-American experience. *Long Journey Home* won the 1972 Lewis Carroll Shelf Award and was a finalist for the National Book Award.

## Setting

When the narrator tells of seeing the McGuire Plantation, he says that "surely there was no more peaceful or beautiful scene in the world. And at such moments I had a difficult time thinking of any arguments against slavery." Most of the narrative focuses on the plantation, a well-managed place of beautiful lawns and magnificent horses. Yet the wonderful house, bountiful fields, and convivial friendliness of the slave owners and the slaves, especially Ben, cover a terrible corruption that is only fully revealed at the story's end. Even without the final revelation of the story, the narrator learns early on that the plantation 4480 Ben is successful mostly because the slave Ben runs it; the whites are almost useless as businessmen.



## Social Sensitivity

Lester takes a fascinating approach to his story by having it focus on a white man's poor understanding of slaves. Through the narrator's difficulty with the moral ambiguities intrinsic to his compromises with slavery, Lester shows how even antislavery whites could be seduced by the slave-owning culture, shows some of the cruelty inherent in one person owning another person as property, and shows how human nature could lead to such terrible cruelty. In so doing he builds on universal aspects of the human condition that are jarring and likely to stir questions in any reader.

As he becomes increasingly familiar with slavery, the narrator finds himself making a series of moral equivocations. Even after a short acquaintance with slavery, he discovers, "In fact I had found it relatively easy to live with slavery, to be waited on hand and foot by silent colored servants."

The courteous slaves are ever present and ever silent, making life easy for those who own them. He moves from enjoying the pleasant life created by having slaves do even his easiest chores, such as carrying his own baggage, to rationalizing his belief that slavery is wrong. He says that "as long as one treated them humanely, what was wrong with slavery." He knows what is wrong, but he allows the conceptual sleight of hand embodied in humane treatment to be a moral opiate to the sense of how he is benefitting from a practice he despises. He moves from rationalization to a horrifying inhumanity—if accepting slavery will give him what he wants, then he will deny even his own humanity: "And you can't treat a slave as an equal, even if he is like your brother." Even his brother! Ben the man is denied even the emotional bonds of brotherhood.



## Literary Qualities

"Ben" is a finely crafted story that evokes thoughtfulness out of its thoughtful treatment of a very complex subject, one that is likely to be uncomfortable and disturbing for many readers: How did the practice of slavery affect white people in free states? Lester dramatizes this question in the story of a character whose idealism is perverted by his self-interest.

His narrator begins as an idealistic young man who hates slavery but one who, because of his desire to prosper economically through marriage to the woman he loves, evolves into a hypocrite who is constantly trying to find a way to live with his conscience and justify the benefits that the practice of slavery brings him. Throughout the story, Lester invites reassessment of how slavery was viewed by the oppressors and the oppressed and how relationships among blacks and whites unfolded. By having a freestate hypocrite narrate the story, Lester takes the daring step of inviting sympathy for the young man's moral compromises. The world of slavery corrupts him in a way that seems inevitable for a typical person of his time: he would have to be extremely sure of his beliefs and extraordinarily courageous in acting on them to defy the pressures of family, economics, and love which unite to solicit his compliance in helping slavery continue to prosper.



## Themes and Characters

The narrator is an equivocating hypocrite who wants in his heart to do right but does not seem to be able to see his way to doing good, mostly because he is confused about right and wrong. He remarks that "we spend our lives not really knowing what we think or feel, afraid that if we do, it may totally disrupt our lives." This is the keynote for the development of his character. He wants a smooth life, one where he can avoid the ethical problems that dog him; he wants to marry Samantha without having to worry about the slaves he would end up owning. His solution is to persuade himself that, as the slave owners tell him, blacks do not think like whites and do not mind being slaves.

He would ask Ben about how slaves feel about slavery, but realizes that an honest answer could not be forthcoming. It is part of Ben's job as a slave to make his master's guest comfortable and to tell him only what the slave owners want him to hear. Besides, getting Ben to talk about himself and his circumstances is impossible, "It was as if he had buried his real self somewhere deep in his black skin."

Ben is not allowed to have a personality, not to have feelings or cares; he must be gracious and self-effacing at all times. To his credit, the narrator never gives up on his fundamental question about slaves: Are they happy? When he finally has the opportunity to ask the question, when he meets Ben in Canada after the Civil War, Ben replies, "Would you have been if you were me?" and then he adds, "Massa." The narrator remarks, "I looked at him, hoping to see the old servile smile crease his lips. Instead, I met his hard, unflinching eyes." He realizes that "Ben would have liked nothing better than to have seen me dead all those years." To think a slave was happy just because he looked happy was wrong; slaves had to look content in order to survive. "Ben" allows us to see under a slave's outward appearance and to learn that even the most favored among them could not possibly have had happy lives.

Samantha, after the narrator and Ben, is the most important of the remaining characters. She is beautiful, graceful, and a wonderful hostess, but she is also entirely ignorant as to how her slaves view her and her family.

She complicates the narrator's life considerably by being tied so strongly to her father's plantation. He wants to marry her and move back to Chicago where she would be a great help to him in his legal practice, but she can't bring herself to leave the family home.

Both her father and brother hope the narrator will take over running the plantation after the father dies. The narrator is not without insight but, like many, he can put aside his morals when they conflict with what he wants. He knows that Ben actually runs the plantation and that he would not be taking over for anyone as long as Ben is working there. The oblivious Samantha is quite sure that Ben does not mind being a slave who earns his master a fortune every year. She, on the other hand, finds that the plantation changes from her home to an alien and comfortless place after her father dies and Ben is sent to the fields to work. In the end, she still fails to understand Ben's true nature.





The other characters are few and of primarily symbolic importance. The narrator's father represents the flock of lawyers, bankers, and profit-hungry businessmen from Northern states whose endeavors prospered through extensive dealings with slave owners.

Indeed, the narrator's father tours the South for a full season each year taking care of legal matters, and then ends his travels at the McGuire plantation, where he relaxes for a time. He justifies the moral ambiguity of his lucrative work with the conviction that black' people are better off being slaves than being free in the jungles of Africa. The narrator never fully follows his father's views, always insisting on calling African-Americans "Negroes" rather than the pejorative epithets used by those around him.

Elliot McGuire represents the regal plantation owner. Although the narrator takes pains to point out that most slave owners lived in ordinary homes, it is Elliot McGuire's life that comes under closest scrutiny, perhaps because his type of plantation lifestyle allows Lester to fully develop Ben's character as a planner and leader. McGuire's talents are for raising horses and managing slaves. It turns out that his intuitive understanding of human needs was essential to the success of the plantation; he knew how to motivate people and with Ben as their leader he had his slaves taking pride in their work. It is his seemingly humane treatment of slaves that deepens the narrator's moral confusion about slavery; the slaves seemed happy, so humanely treated slaves might truly be happy.

On the other hand, Elliot's son Albert McGuire is totally lacking in the humanity, knowledge, and skills necessary to manage people. He and Ben may have been boyhood friends, but Ben was a slave first, and Albert determines to put him in his place. Albert sends Ben to the fields to work and hires a brutal overseer in his place.

Albert is a fool, and he represents the sort of corrupt man that can develop from slave ownership. Never having had to work without direction before, he now neither can work for himself nor effectively guide others in their work.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Central to "Ben" is the narrator's personality, and his moral compromises offer much opportunity for discussion. When does the narrator begin to accept slavery as part of his life? Why does he do it?
2. Why is Samantha smiling and reluctant to leave the home of Ben and Martha at the story's end?
3. Why does the narrator decide to marry Samantha even though he is dismayed by the prospect of managing slaves?
4. What qualities does Elliot McGuire have that his son Albert lacks that make the difference between successfully running or ruining a plantation?
5. What is the purpose and effect of comparing slaves to horses?
6. What aspects of slavery make the practice seductive to the narrator?
7. Why does Ben pretend not to know the narrator and Samantha when they meet in Canada?
8. Why would Albert McGuire and the overseer fall for Ben's pretending to want to return to slavery?
9. How well does the short story explain why an intelligent, tough man like Ben would behave obsequiously, always servilely smiling at people he would like to see dead?
10. Why is Albert McGuire cruel to Ben, whom he remembers fondly as a childhood friend?
11. Why is Samantha, who has grown up with slavery, angry at Ben's treatment?
12. What is the effect of knowing that "Ben" is based on a real-life story?
13. Early in the story, the narrator looks at the slowness of slaves and thinks that he, too, might be slow to go about his business if owned by someone else. Yet Ben's comment, "Would you have been if you were me?" surprises the narrator at the end of the story. What has caused the narrator to stop putting himself into other people's shoes?
14. Lester gives the narrator a mix of bad and good qualities. Why would he do this? Does this mixture of traits in the narrator make the story easier to read or harder to read than it would be if the narrator were all good or all bad?
15. Why is Samantha willing to leave her plantation near the end of the story when she had earlier insisted that her husband had to live with her there?



16. Is the narrator a better or worse man at the story's end?
17. Why would Lester title his story "Ben" when Ben is not the main character?
18. Why would Albert McGuire be in favor of the narrator taking over the plantation?  
After all, the plantation should belong to him.
19. Why doesn't Lester give the narrator a name?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Was it common for a slave plantation to have a slave like Ben managing its business? What were slaves usually expected to do?
2. Ben is whipped across his chest in one scene. What punishments were visited on slaves in order to "break" them?
3. The short story "Ben" is based on an account in William C. Nell's *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*. How does Nell's account differ from Lester's story? What has Lester added or subtracted?
4. According to Lester, most slaves did not live on plantations. How many plantations were there in Kentucky?

What percentage of Kentucky's slave population lived on plantations? How important were they to the economy of Kentucky before the Civil War?

5. What jobs did the "outside" slaves perform on a big plantation like that in "Ben"?
6. What northern businesses profited from the slave economy in the South?
7. Why did Ben and Martha go to Canada? Did many escaped slaves go there? How did they get there?
8. One of the attractive aspects of "Ben" is its thematic depth and its effort to tie its themes to universal human experience. What themes touch on aspects of being human that are universal? What does Lester say about them? Is he successful giving his story a universal meaning beyond its time and setting?
9. What were the duties of household slaves in Ben's time? Were they expected to behave the way Ben behaves?
10. William C. Nell's *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* contains many stories that could be used to inspire short stories. Select one and write your own story about the people who would have been involved in its events.

## For Further Reference

Lester, Julius. *All Is Well*. New York: Morrow, 1976. Lester's early life.

———. *Lovesong: Becoming a Jew*. New York: Arcade, 1988. A spiritual journey that reveals some of Lester's motivations for writing.

Nell, William C. *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*. New York: Arno Press, 1968 (circa 1855). The basis for "Ben" is in this book.

## Related Titles

"Ben" is from the book *Long Journey Home* (1972), a collection of short stories that focus on the experiences of African-Americans. As with "Ben," the other stories acquaint Lester's readers with history that they may not have encountered in school, and he focuses primarily on ordinary people in order to depict what everyday life was like.

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## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

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Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996