

Elijah of Buxton Study Guide

Elijah of Buxton by Christopher Paul Curtis

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Plot Summary

Young Elijah Freeman has a special life. Elijah was the very first child to be born free in the Elgin settlement at Raleigh in Canada West near the American border. The settlement, located in Buxton, was established to help and protect runaway slaves escaping from America.

One of the founders of the settlement, the very important Mr. Frederick Douglass, visited once when Elijah was a baby. Delivering a passionate speech, Mr. Douglass held baby Elijah, tossing him into the air. Unfortunately, baby Elijah vomited on his head. The story of this incident has been hilariously embellished over the years by the town folk, leaving Elijah with a reputation not only for his status of the first free-born child in Elgin, but for this embarrassing mishap, as well.

Elijah's most special talent involves "chunking" rocks. He has an expert aim, and has taught himself how to kill fish by hitting them in the head with rocks. His biggest problem is his frightened nature, of which his mother constantly tries to make him aware. Elijah scares easily and is, what his mother calls, "fra-gile."

Elijah's story tumbles along through his adventures with his best friend, Cooter, and his unusual relationship with a sketchy "preacher," who is clearly not the holy man he pretends to be. Elijah inadvertently becomes embroiled in a scheme that turns dangerous and, in his desire to help his good friend, Leroy, he must work up the courage to go into Michigan to face down a thief, slave catchers, gamblers, white people, and the aura of danger for African Americans during a treacherous time in American history.



Chapter 1 and 2

Chapter 1 and 2 Summary

On a Sunday afternoon, Elijah's friend Cooter wants to solve a mystery. There are unusual, long wiggly tracks in the dirt. When Preacher comes by, he tells them these are tracks of rolling hoop snakes, which are so poisonous that one of their bites kills a human or animal. He asks the boys to use his pistol and shoot him if he ever gets bitten by one, the suffering is so awful. Elijah, who is terrified of any snake, runs screaming to his mother. She has tried to teach him not to be so afraid of things, by explaining the ant hill and toady-frogs. Elijah and Cooter plant a frog in his mother's knitting to frighten her, which sets them into gales of laughter. Expecting a whipping, he is proud of his mother for taking the joke so well. Two days later when she offers him a cookie, Elijah reaches into a jar and finds himself holding a snake. He runs fast, making Ma and Pa laugh, and is shocked to realize that Mama had played a joke on him. Elijah sobs with fear, and feels this is too much revenge for his toady-frog trick, and doesn't understand why his mother wants to make him even more fragile.

Chapter 2. Elijah is glad no one else saw him run from the snake, because it would be pinned to him forever, just like the tragedy of vomiting on Mr. Douglass when he was a baby. Before he turned one year, Frederick Douglass and Mr. John Brown visited Buxton. The settlement people were very excited and fixed the town up for their visit. This event was to celebrate three famous people, the third one being little Elijah, for being the first free-born baby in the settlement. The baby clothes from this event are still in a cedar box his mother keeps. After the speeches, Mr. Douglass got excited and started bouncing and swinging the baby and holding him up. Baby Elijah vomited on Mr. Douglass's head. The story has been embellished over time, with people claiming that Elijah threw up so much that wild animals came for a meal. Embellishing stories was the only thing slaves were able to do without a white person telling them how or when.

Chapter 1 and 2 Analysis

Elijah is a gullible little child with a huge fear of snakes and many other things. A good, sound sense of humor exists in Elijah's family, although his mother really does seem worried about Elijah's fearfulness. She wants him to reason things out before reacting with fear, and tries to toughen him up in a positive way. The Preacher is obviously an unscrupulous person, using the title of preacher to excuse his behavior. Preachers generally don't carry guns, or offer them to young children, even as a joke. This grown man purposefully frightens two little boys for his own pleasure.

Slavery is key issue in this story. Elijah's mother recalls that one of the few things slaves could do without being controlled by white people was to embellish their stories. At a time when freedom was a relatively new concept for African Americans, we see the residual effects of slavery. Mr. Douglass's unbridled joy over a free-born baby hints at

the effort and earnestness of the abolition movement, and what it meant to African Americans.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

After school, Elijah hurries to do his chores so he can deliver fish that he has promised. A smart mule, Flapjack, knows in advance when he's coming. Elijah does his unpleasant chores first, and afterward tries to catch live flies off the horses to use for fishing. He imagines the horseflies having a standoff, and stunning them is an art form for him.

The Preacher once welcomed seven newly freed slaves, warning them about the weather and horseflies, and stretching the truth about himself. Mr. Segee, who has a dry sense of humor, always trusts that Elijah has done a thorough job at the stables. Flapjack takes off first, Elijah catches up. Elijah believes mules are better than horses for several reasons.

The Preacher, since he has lately seen Jesus giving gifts to Elijah, sometimes comes along and shoots his "mystery pistol." The Preacher is so impressed with Elijah's talent with "chunking" rocks that he wonders if Elijah is "conjuring." One day the Preacher leads Elijah, who fears bears, deep into the woods, to target practice rock-throwing. He decides Elijah has a gift from Jesus, but Elijah knows it takes a lot of practice. His parents have doubts about the Preacher.

Like his work, Elijah divides his secret lake into two parts, swimming on one side and fishing the other. He gets the smaller fish stirred up with dead horseflies, which attracts the larger ones to the live flies, then he hits the fish with a rock and pulls it up with a net. He imagines how the fish must think, and does not think they are very smart. Flapjack alerts him to a noise. When he is finished he has ten fish for people, one of them being to trade with Mrs. Brown for baked goods.

The Preacher shows up and wants to use Elijah's gift, supposedly to help the settlement. Elijah knows what sweet-talking is, but the Preacher double-talks him out of four of the fish, doing questionable math and talking about tithing.

Chapter 3 Analysis

It is clear by now that the Preacher is dishonest and conniving. He carries a gun and offers to let a child shoot it. He uses religion as a way to get what he wants, even though Elijah's parents have commented that he is far removed from the Bible. Elijah likes his flattering, but the Preacher showing up and wheedling four fish from him foreshadows trouble. It is interesting that of all of Elijah's fears, he is not afraid of the Preacher's gun and wants to shoot it.

Elijah is a bright child and goes about his work methodically. With his rich imagination, he personifies insects and animals, and practices his sharp-shooting with rocks with



intensity. He has good values and morals, and wants to help others, but the Preacher seems to have targeted him for activities that may not be so wholesome. Elijah, unfortunately, respects him as a very smart man.

In his child's mind, Elijah does not necessarily disbelieve the notion of "conjuring," as illustrated in his imaginary confrontation between the two horseflies.



Chapters 4 and 5

Chapters 4 and 5 Summary

Elijah comes to the realization that the Preacher is not a good or honest man. Elijah recalls a day at school when the children were excused and escorted home, which had been a sure sign that something was wrong.

Outside, the men of the town are armed. They are prepared for slave catchers who have been seen asking directions to Buxton. The Preachers went south to look for them, and nothing else happened. Curious, Elijah sneaks out at night and sees a huge white riderless stallion that has blood on its flank. Three days later the Preacher shows up with a fancy holster and the mystery pistol, saying he found them in the woods, but the people are suspicious and begin making up stories about what really happened. Elijah thinks the Preacher found the two men, but does not understand why he only has one pistol.

Chapter 5. Elijah starts home with a heavy load of fish, but he is a strong boy. The neighbors comment on his fish as he passes them. He makes a trade with Mrs. Brown — a catfish for a cherry pie. She has been mourning since losing her baby two years ago, and seems to look for him in the night in the woods. Although the settlement houses are quite similar, the Brown's house is much simpler than Elijah's. Elijah chooses his pie, cleans Mrs. Brown's fish, and goes home for a fish dinner cooked by his mother, who is better at cooking fish than baking. He goes to find Mr. Leroy with two fried fish and a fuller dinner plate. Mr. Leroy is chopping wood for Mrs. Holton, who is wealthier than other residents of Buxton. Mr. Leroy is happy to work for her, rather than for white farmers in Chatham, and has built her home and dug her drainage ditches. He is now chopping down trees. Mr. Leroy stops and eats his fish, including fins and bones. He says that if you are timid and expecting something bad, you will draw it to you, and vice versa. When he is finished eating, Elijah joins him in his work.

Chapters 4 and 5 Analysis

In telling the story of the Preacher's gun, we learn that the settlement is still threatened by those who want to capture escaped slaves. It certainly sounds like the Preacher did away with the last two who were supposedly on their way to Buxton. School is an important element of the settlement, and for school to be interrupted is a sure sign of something serious.

Chapter 5. Again, we see the goodness in this child, who tries to make sure he brings enough fish for the people he has promised, and is kind enough to stop and clean Mrs. Brown's fish for her. He is a hard worker and, after a day of school, working in the horse stalls and catching fish, he is off to work for Mr. Leroy in the evening. Mentioning that he

got "jack-legged" out of four of his fish reveals that Elijah knows the Preacher is a con-man.



Chapters 6 and 7

Chapters 6 and 7 Summary

Elijah is disturbed that Mr. Travis is teaching both Sabbath classes and public school. Cooter thinks Mr. Travis is worked up over the lesson he has planned regarding, "Familiarity breeds contempt." Cooter thinks it involves "breeding," and that Mr. Travis has not been watched over lately, so he is trying to get away with teaching this. Mr. Travis sees Cooter smiling, and twists his ear in a state of rage. Inadvertently, Cooter had not shown Mr. Travis the proper respect in town the day before, and he wants the children to learn respect for their superiors. His rage escalates when he hears Cooter say that they thought the lesson would be a family breeding contest. He punishes them with swats and writing assignments.

Chapter 7. Mr. Leroy stops working earlier than usual for lack of light from the moon. Elijah tries to talk to him about the incident at school on their walk home together. Going on with his story, and thinking Leroy is not listening, Elijah almost utters the word, "nigger," and Mr. Leroy slaps him down to the ground. He shows Elijah his slavery scars, including his missing little finger. He tries to make Elijah understand this is a word of hate, and is not to be carried to Canada. Elijah's father has warned him that former slaves are "toting things 'round with 'em that cain't be seen with your regular eyes." Elijah fully forgives Mr. Leroy for slapping him and learns his lesson.

Chapters 6 and 7 Analysis

Mr. Travis, who is teaching both school and Sunday school, has some emotional problems, which he takes out on the students. He does not feel that he gets enough respect, based on Cooter's casual greeting to him in town. Hilariously, Cooter and Elijah think that Mr. Travis's lesson plan is all about sex, and are sorely surprised to find out what it really means. The word "breeding" helped them form their conclusion about the lesson. Mr. Travis does not want the free black children to be smug about their freedom or to take it for granted.

Chapter 7. The lesson, again for Elijah, concerns respect. His good friend Mr. Leroy has a violent response to Elijah's use of the bad word, and this chapter reminds us of the suffering that slavery imposed on these poor, victimized people. Even after gaining their freedom, they are in psychic pain, and Mr. Leroy does not want to see hatred carried into the Settlement, even casually or accidentally. He is a good man, and he is very damaged.



Chapters 8 and 9

Chapters 8 and 9 Summary

The Preacher comes by the stable to let Elijah know a carnival is coming to the area. Cooter's mother has already told him he cannot go. The Preacher tries to make Elijah feel guilty if he doesn't use this opportunity to help the Settlement.

At the carnival, they approach the booth of Madame Sabbar, who has slain 541 lions in the jungles of Sweden with her slingshot. There are no lions in Sweden because she has supposedly killed them all. Elijah has never known anyone who has ever even seen a lion, and this makes him shake. She performs her skills, aiming at a bullseye and putting out candle flames with marbles. Mawee, a little white boy who is supposedly a member of the savage Mobongo tribe emerges, and magically blinds Madame Sabbar. Elijah recognizes the boy as Jimmy Blassingame from school. Jimmy pokes his head out of various holes, as Madame aims purple grapes at him, with help from the audience. One of the many grapes that hits Jimmy shoots right down his throat and has to be expelled by the Carnival man. The crowd, except for the Preacher, Elijah and Jimmy, applaud. Jimmy cries.

Chapter 9 Elijah is overwhelmed by the wild cacophony and sights of the carnival. He is somewhat appalled at the freak shows, especially the conjurer, who is the owner of the carnival, and whom the Preacher forces Elijah to accompany to see the mesmerist. Elijah is truly afraid of the power of this man, whose eyes seem like a dead person, but the Preacher forces him to watch so he can learn how a flimflam works. A young white boy tells Elijah that there is someone in Chatham named Elijah who would hurt him if he learned that Elijah had the same name. The boy also tells Elijah that the conjurer is a fake.

The conjurer calls out the white boy, Samuel, and proceeds to hypnotize him with a great flourish. Obeying his master, Samuel acts like a chicken, reacts to the suggestion that it is freezing in the tent, and then that the heat is unbearable. The conjurer suggests to Samuel that he is about to swim in Lake Erie, and gets him to take most of his clothes off. The Preacher tells Elijah not to mention a word of any of this to anyone.

Chapters 8 and 9 Analysis

The Preacher, himself, appears to be some kind of con-man, and he sees Elijah's potential as a way to earn some money. The reason Elijah's and Cooter's mothers do not want them to go to the carnival is that it is seedy, weird, and has bawdy undertones. The little boy who pretends to get hypnotized for Madame Sabbar is a tragic figure who will, obviously, do just about anything for some money and/or food. The Preacher has played on Elijah's goodwill and his loyalty to the Settlement by making him think he can



be of some extra value to his people. He also very vaguely implies that the Preacher might tell his mother other things she doesn't know about Elijah's behavior.

Chapter 9: The contrast in these chapters with regard to the carnival is that Elijah comes from a hard-working and honest family. The carnival is full of deceit, fraud and con-men. Elijah by this time knows that even the Preacher is a con-man, but he is still innocent enough to be excited about seeing the carnival. The descriptions of his first experience at such an event is beautifully written by the author, suggesting the loud colors and sounds that all seem to blend into a din, especially for a young child. Although Elijah is quite naive, he spots the falseness of the acts and shows.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The Preacher offers Elijah up to the carnival owner as "Ahbo," saying he is the last surviving member of the African Chocote tribe, and that he is an orphan. He says Ahbo's father was the king of the Chochotes. He also claims that Elijah learned his craft by killing giant Bama bees that attack people in swarms of ten.

The child who worked with the conjurer before Samuel had been hired, was the original "MaWee," a black child who is feeling frightened that Elijah may take his jobs as the target of Madame Sabarr's grapes, and stage helper to the conjurer. Roberts had felt that the people of Buxton would not like seeing a black child get hit with grapes, and temporarily hired the white child instead. MaWee was bought by "Massa" Charles, the carnival's owner. He tells Elijah about the horrid living conditions at the carnival, and that he is an orphan.

A test is arranged. MaWee lights the candles in Madame Sabbar's tent, and Elijah shows his "chunking" ability in front of all of them. The Preacher then pits Elijah's skills against Madam Sabbar, and Elijah wins easily. The two go to visit the carnival owner, Mr. Roberts, where the Preacher tries to make some kind of deal involving himself and Elijah traveling with the carnival. Mr. Roberts would like to take guardianship of Elijah.

Little MaWee is totally dependent upon Mr. Charles, but does not see himself as a slave. When the two men and the Preacher cannot agree, the Preacher takes Elijah and heads home. After climbing back through his bedroom window, Elijah sees the Preacher heading back toward Chatham.

On Monday, little MaWee shows up at school, his hair cut and in proper clothes. He says the Preacher stole him from the carnival, using his gun. MaWee does not feel good about being free, and wonders how going to school and being under the direction of Johnny and his momma is free. He is not happy about being taken to Buxton, but the carnival has moved on and left him behind. He still expects them to rescue him, and believes the Preacher's comments about Buxton's huge army.

Mr. Travis, the school teacher, is unusually kind and patient with MaWee.

Chapter 10 Analysis

This is a very interesting chapter, especially as it pertains to MaWee. In slavery days, even though the conditions were inhumane and harsh, there were slaves who knew nothing different and were dependent upon their masters for everything. This is MaWee's situation. He cannot imagine what it means to be free.



It is still unclear what the Preacher was up to at the carnival, and what kind of deal he wanted to make regarding Elijah. His behavior, and what is known about him thus far, foreshadows trouble for Elijah later in the story. It is hilarious that the Reverend calls himself the "Right Reverend Deacon Doctor Zephariah Connerly, the Third; and Mr. Roberts says he is Charles Mondial Vaughn the Fourth, the Knight Commander of the Most Honourable Order of Bath, knighted fourteen years ago. These two men have delusions of self-importance.

Although MaWee was bought and paid for, he does not think he is a slave. Freedom, with its privileges, seems more like slavery to him. Also, it is now up for debate whether the Preacher is really a good man or not, since he does not steal anything except MaWee.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Emma Collins, who has been mentioned several times in the story, was the second free-born child in the Settlement. When Flapjack communicates unrest, Elijah sees people hiding in the woods and Emma is beckoned to come and welcome them, since they have realized that when this happens, the people are so frightened that it takes a gentle child to bring them out of the woods. Emma is "fra-gile," like Elijah, and carries a little doll. When the slaves come out from hiding, Elijah's father embraces the man, who is afraid to believe they have actually made it to Buxton. They have obviously been terrified on their journey; there is a woman, a baby, a boy and girl, and a father. The family screams and wails and hugs when they realize they have made it to freedom. Their emotions cause Emma to cry and, being fra-gile, also bring Elijah to tears.

The woman's baby has not been awake for two days. The woman has been giving the baby "quieting" medicine and is afraid she's given her too much. Emma tries to make friends with the little girl, who is frightened and holding on to her brother. Emma gives the girl her little doll, named Birdy, and asks the girl to be Birdy's new ma. Elijah does not talk to the little boy because the boy has wet his pants and Elijah does not want to embarrass him. It is Cooter's turn to ring the Liberty Bell to welcome the newly free family.

Chapter 11 Analysis

This is a very poignant chapter. The newly-free slaves are terrified, exhilarated, exhausted and emotionally over-wrought as they finally realize that they have arrived in Buxton. It is a fairly common occurrence, since the children know what to do and how to handle them. The routine of having little Emma be the one to welcome them demonstrates their understanding that these people are ultra-fragile at this time. They have faced the terror of being chased for many miles and being afraid of everyone they see. Their lives have been on the line for the entire trip and the prospect of never having to be afraid again is more than they can handle.

It is interesting that Elijah's father tells him to go get Emma Collins, and to run, once he is out of sight. They do not want the runaway slaves to see him running because they do not want to frighten them in their delicate, "skittish" state.

As for Elijah, his fragility shows up in his tears of happiness. He is a tender-hearted little boy who is sometimes very wise for his age. He understands that Emma is fra-gile, too.



Chapters 12 and 13

Chapters 12 and 13 Summary

Buxton's Liberty Bell was a gift from Philadelphia. The bell is part of a special ritual that takes place when newly free runaways reach the town. The bell is rung twenty times for each person, and each one climbs the steeple and places their left hand on the bell. When the bell rings, everyone in the settlement stops what they are doing and comes to the schoolhouse to welcome the newcomers, and to decide who will help them with what. Elijah's father delivers his standard speech to the new family, assuring them that this is the most beautiful day ever, now that they have reached freedom.

Before stuffing their ears with cotton, Cooter and Elijah calculate that the bell needs to be rung one hundred times, twenty for each runaway. The new family is named Taylor, Liza being the wife. The two Duncan sisters, Miss Duncan the first and Miss Duncan the second, realize that Liza is actually Alice, their sister, but they decide not to tell her just yet. Elijah understands this decision and realizes that this is grown up thinking. He figures that grown people are going to have to hear all the bad things a relative has gone through without them, and maybe "it's best not looked at too hard."

Chapter 13. Elijah likes to go to Chatham on old Flapjack to check on the mail. On this particular trip, Flapjack gets frightened by something and throws Elijah to the road. Mr. Polite tells Elijah to go back and get a horse because he is expecting a package from Toronto. The Postman in Chatham had a bad accident with a horse, and Mr. MacMahon at the dry goods store says Mr. Butler's mind is no longer with us. The mail contains a letter to Mrs. Holton from Virginia, written in fancy handwriting, which implies to Elijah that someone has died.

As Elijah and his mother walk to Mrs. Holton's house, neighbors begin to tag along with food, assuming the letter holds bad news. Elijah reads the letter to Mrs. Holton. It was written a year ago and is from Mrs. Jacob Poole. Mrs. Poole explains that Mrs. Holton's husband, John, was brought back into servitude. He was accused of stealing gold, and was so severely punished that he died. He is buried in the slave graveyard in a marked grave. She tells Mrs. Holton that if she is so disposed, she could reimburse Mrs. Poole for the expenses of burying her husband.

After the other neighbors leave, Elijah's mom spends some quiet time with Mrs. Holton, who knows her husband would not want heavy mourning. They realize that they came from the same area in America. The two women are also attending classes to learn to read and write.

Elijah feels proud that he did not cry at Mrs. Holton's. The crowd of women holding Mrs. Holton made him strong. When his mother compliments him later, he begins to cry again.



Chapters 12 and 13 Analysis

It is humorous that Cooter and Elijah come away from ringing the bell, unable to hear because of the cotton in their ears. It seems like a beautiful celebration of freedom that welcomes new people to Buxton. Elijah's mother takes the little boy to clean him up, while another person takes on treating the baby. There is a real sense of communal love in this chapter.

Chapter 13: Flapjack is Elijah's best friend, and Elijah respects the mule's idiosyncrasies. Mr. MacMahon, the storekeeper, is a likeable character, with his one leg and friendly brogue. Elijah's fragility shows up as soon as he sees the letter from America. His sense of empathy and sympathy are well developed for a child. He certainly sees crying as a weakness and is proud when he can get through an emotional moment without tears.

The familial relationships among the runaways is fascinating. Because they had no control over where they would live or raise their children, family members got separated frequently. It is also amazing that Liz/Alice is only twenty-six years old and has borne eight children.



Chapters 14 and 15

Chapters 14 and 15 Summary

Elijah is not very enthused about spending Sundays at church, but this Sunday they are going on a picnic at Lake Erie afterward. When Emma tells Cooter and Elijah they have misinterpreted Mr. Travis's comment in Latin, Elijah thinks it just her ongoing jealousy toward him.

Riding on a buckboard with mixed children and adults, the children play slaver and abolitionist. Elijah's mother and Mrs. Holton hold a conversation about their times in slavery. His mother recalls being separated as a girl from her mother, forced to accompany their white family on a trip to Flint, Michigan. She misses her mother terribly and when they finally reunite, she mentions that she had been up by Canada. Her mother slaps her three times. She is angry that her daughter did not try to get away to Canada when she was that close. The next time she went to Michigan, two years later, she knew she would never see her mother again. Ma and Mrs. Holton share a loving, tender moment together on the buckboard.

While at the picnic, Elijah sees his father bury a piece of his mother's peach pie. He tells Elijah to bury it deeper later on so no wild animal will eat it and die a horrible slow death.

Chapter 15. Mr. Leroy asks Elijah for help with words he is carving into a decorative wood plaque to hang over Mrs. Holton's door. Mrs. Holton pays Elijah a nickel for helping with the words, and gives Mr. Leroy a beautiful box with \$2200 of gold inside. She had been saving to bring Mr. Holton home, but now wants Leroy to use the money to bring his family. The three of them cry together, and Elijah leaves Mr. Leroy on the porch with his face pressed to the box.

Chapters 14 and 15 Analysis

This is a more light-hearted chapter. The neighbors go on a picnic and play together. The adults relax together and the tone is one of a lush and lovely Sunday afternoon. The neighbors are like a family and are good to one another. What they have in common is so horrid that they usually do not discuss it in front of children. There is also a secret bond between Elijah and his father regarding his mother's shortcomings as a baker.

Chapter 15. Leroy's good fortune is almost too good to be true. He will now have more than enough money to get his family to Buxton. The sad loss of Mr. Holton turns into a huge gain for Mr. Leroy.



Chapters 16 and 17

Chapters 16 and 17 Summary

Mr. Leroy comes to ask Elijah's father, Spencer, how he can get his family out. He confesses that he does not feel he has much time left, because he has been sick for a while. The Preacher, Zephariah, recalls a man just outside of Detroit who still pretends to buy slaves for his plantation, and takes them to freedom. Elijah's father has doubts about this, but the Preacher is willing to go and get Mr. Leroy's family, just for the pleasure of seeing them walk into the Settlement. However, Spencer questions what they really know about Zephariah - he doesn't live in the Settlement, he doesn't have regular work, he carries a pistol, and comes and goes. Spencer insists that someone go with the Preacher rather than let him go alone with all that money. Leroy confronts Elijah for his opinion about the Preacher, but Elijah decides that the Preacher would never steal the money. A neighbor, Theodore Highgate, will go with the Preacher. The Preacher leaves his fancy pistol with Mr. Leroy as a way to assure him that he will not take his money.

Chapter 17. Word comes to town that Mr. Highgate is seriously injured and is being brought back to the settlement without the Preacher. Mr. Highgate keeps repeating, "he shot me," and Spencer sends for a doctor in Chatham. Mr. Highgate tells them that the Preacher has another pistol, just like the one he left with Mr. Leroy. When they had reached the village near Detroit, the Preacher had told him he was going to gamble with Leroy's money. Highgate had told him he could not do that, and they both pointed their guns at one another. Highgate's ammunition had been removed from his shotgun. The Preacher used the money to gamble and drink; Mr. Highgate was unconscious for a couple days, but was sent home by some good folks in the logging town. Elijah feels he is to blame for all of this because he had told Mr. Leroy that the Preacher would not steal his money.

When Leroy is told what happened, Elijah mistakes his violent reaction as a threat, and runs into the woods, thinking Leroy was going to chop him with his axe. He feels someone grab him by the collar.

Chapters 16 and 17 Analysis

Mr. Leroy's anxiety about getting his family out of slavery and about his own health leads him to make a hasty decision. He does not want to wait for the underground railroad. It is important to remember what Elijah has told the reader about the Preacher. There were two "slavers" who were killed in the woods, but the Preacher only showed up with one fancy pistol. Elijah is fairly certain it was the Preacher who killed them. He tried to sell Elijah to the carnival, and is overall, not a great guy, but is a shady character who just happens to show up when a vulnerable man is holding a large amount of money. His claim to be a Preacher is a ploy to make people trust him.



Chapter 17. The Preacher's real intentions come to light in this chapter. Poor Mr. Highgate, whose intentions were pure, is injured and unable to stop the worst thing from happening to his friend, Leroy, which is to lose the money that would bring Leroy's family to freedom. After trying throughout the story to be more "growned up," poor Elijah wishes he had not been involved in grownup talk now that the Preacher has been shown to be a scoundrel. Leroy's rage frightens Elijah, who is sure he is going to be killed.



Chapters 18 and 19

Chapters 18 and 19 Summary

Elijah's father catches him and tells him this is a lesson to never want something so much that it blinds you to the truth. A town meeting is called to discuss what might be done for Mr. Leroy. Elijah, who feels he should be at the meeting, is told to stay at Cooter's for the night. He tells Cooter's mother that his mother asked him to go to the meeting for an hour or so. Cooter cannot go because he is standing in the corner, being punished for something at school. Elijah sets off in the woods, planning to go around the back of the church so he won't be seen. He is suddenly grabbed. His mouth is covered by a big hand and he is carried back into the woods.

Chapter 19. Once again, Elijah is sure he is about to be killed, but he finally realizes that it is Mr. Leroy, who is now breathing hard and holding his left arm. Mr. Leroy needs Elijah's help. He wants to go find out if any of his money is left in Michigan, and to shoot Zephariah for stealing his dreams. He is wearing the pistol Zephariah left with him. He needs Elijah to come with him because he cannot read, and he is giving him no choice, and is actually kidnapping him. Elijah tries to arrange things so that no one will notice his absence until the following evening. He writes Cooter a note to explain that he has been kidnapped by Mr. Leroy. The village in Michigan is only an hour from Detroit on horseback. Elijah knows that Leroy is too upset to think, and he will have to do the thinking for him.

Stopping back at his house to get food for the trip, Elijah runs into his parents who are just leaving. He secretly packs some chunking stones, Mr. Taylor's knife and the info about the people who had helped Mr. Highgate get home.

Not sure if he will ever get back home, Elijah goes back into the woods and meets Mr. Leroy. They head southwest to find the "stealer of dreams."

Chapters 18 and 19 Analysis

Elijah is feeling that he is an important part of the recent tragedy and does not want to be left out of the meeting. It is important enough for him, that he lies to Cooter's mother. There is tension in the story that lets the reader know something important is about to take place.

Chapter 19. Mr. Leroy is out of his mind with grief over his lost money and broken dreams of having his family back. He is obviously suffering from a heart problem, since Elijah describes him as looking dead, and he is grabbing his left arm. Elijah understands that Mr. Leroy is looking at things the way he wants them to be, not the way they are. By the time they are ready to leave, Elijah has become the parent figure and Mr. Leroy the child.



Chapters 20 and 21

Chapters 20 and 21 Summary

The long, bumpy ride on the big horse, Jingle-Boy, is hard on Elijah, and is stressful for the horse, as well as Mr. Leroy. Elijah warns Leroy not to push the horse so hard. When they reach the village, they are told that Benjamin Alston is at the tavern. They also find out that the Preacher has cleaned out everyone's cash and has moved on. They find Benjamin Alston and thank him for helping Mr. Highgate. The men say that the Preacher may be at East Lee stable gambling with slavers and white men. Mr. Leroy asks Elijah to guide the horse by its reins and they head toward the stable, but Mr. Leroy slides off the horse to the ground. He thinks Elijah is his son, Ezekiel, and tells him to get the money. He makes Elijah promise, and gives him the Preacher's gun, and dies. Elijah runs back to the tavern for help, but Leroy has passed. He tells the men he has an aunt close by so they will not thwart his plans. He takes off on Jingle Boy.

Chapter 21. Elijah arrives at the stable and encounters a mean, bear-fighting dog whom he chunks in the head with one of his stones. Sneaking quietly into the dark stable, Elijah waits for his eyes to adjust, and notices a horrid smell. He slowly sees the Preacher standing on the other end of the stable, arms up and still. He slowly begins to make his way to him, and hears a humming sound off to his left where bundles are up against the wall. He almost faints, and thinks he has come all the way to the US to see his first haint. He finally realizes he is seeing a woman shackled to the wall, with a baby tied to her front. There is a white man with a gun, asleep. Elijah brings water to the woman. The woman's arms are free because of the baby, but the four men are unable to use their arms, so Elijah gives them each a drink. Three of them are African. One is a boy who has been crying. Elijah wipes off the boy's face and gives him a drink.

The Preacher has been brutalized and is dead. Elijah is glad he won't have to shoot him. The slave woman is shocked that they are only an hour from Canada. Elijah thinks about how different it is to play games about slavers and abolitionists, and he decides that he is going to get these people out of here.

Chapters 20 and 21 Analysis

It turns out that Mr. Leroy was right about not having time to waste. Elijah, the fra-gile child is now in a situation that goes far beyond most people's experiences of fear. He is in a strange place with no friends, where people are known to hunt down his kind and put them into slavery. His good friend is dead and he has no one to trust but himself.

Deciding that the strange smell in the stable is fear is a large leap for a child. But Elijah knows all the smells of stables and animals, and this one is different. Being forced to confront his own fear now, the reality of slavery is facing him and his fragility is going to have to step aside because he now knows for sure what it is he has been imagining

when he plays. The seriousness of the situation becomes very clear to him and he is going to have to act like a grownup.



Chapters 22, 23 and 24

Chapters 22, 23 and 24 Summary

The slaves are being held by a Massa Prayder. Elijah begins to make plans for getting the slaves out of the stable, but his thoughts become jumbled and he begins to cry again. The slave woman, Chloe, holds his head and tells him he is the shiniest thing they have seen but assures him there is no way to get them out. She wants to hold the pistol; Elijah shows her how it works. Chloe tries to readjust her chains, and hands Elijah the baby to hold for her. Chloe begins telling Elijah how much the baby loves him, and he finally realizes she is trying to get him to understand something. He does not get it, but remembers Mr. Alston, and tells her he is going for help.

Chapter 23. Elijah finds Mr. Alston, still gambling. He begs the men for help in helping the runaways escape, but they are not interested in taking the risk. Elijah leaves, but stops to vomit. He knows he cannot fix this situation and decides to heed Chloe's advice. He heads back toward Buxton.

Chapter 24. With a guilty conscience, Elijah pushes Jingle Boy toward home. He is disappointed he could not figure out what Chloe was trying to tell him. He suddenly realizes what she meant, and turns back around and heads to the village. Chunking another stone at the dog, he goes back into the stable.

Elijah tells Chloe that the baby looks exactly like his own baby sister who died from fever two years ago. He says his mother has never stopped mourning and cannot have any more children; she walks in the woods at night and would give anything to see her baby again, or even just to raise another child. This is actually the story of Mrs. Brown.

Elijah says he wonders if he could borrow the baby for his mother. Chloe has promised the baby she wouldn't allow her to go back to Kentucky. She expresses her love for Elijah and tells him not to cry. She asks Elijah to take the baby over to her African father to hold for a moment. The baby's name is Too-mah-ee-nee, but Chloe calls her Hope. Chloe asks him to tell her about her parents when she is older.

Elijah takes the baby to Buxton on Jingle Boy and, as they approach, he uses some of his father's welcoming language. Elijah intends to give the baby to the mourning Mrs. Brown, whose story he told Chloe. The baby spits up water on him, but Elijah just laughs. Wanting to go easy on Jingle-Boy, he rides him on mule speed. They arrive in Buxton around noon, the baby sleeping the whole way.

Chapters 22, 23 and 24 Analysis

The hideous circumstances of the runaway slaves is told in an eery, shocking way. Elijah makes the reader see that, even if we could imagine something so horrible, it would still be nothing like the reality he is seeing in this chapter.



Chapter 23 and 24. Elijah was hoping for some adult help, but again, realizes that reality isn't necessarily what we want it to be. Elijah understands what an innuendo is, but does not know how to read them very well, because he is young and naive. However, his long-awaited courage is sparked by his realization of what Chloe wants, and he even makes up a story to make everyone feel better about his taking the baby.

The baby spitting up on Elijah is ironic because of his guilt and shame over throwing up on Mr. Douglass when he was a baby. The event makes him laugh, and he realizes that bringing this baby to Buxton is going to wash away that part of his reputation. The reader is left knowing that Elijah has certainly done a lot of growing up in a few days time. The baby being named Hope, is the strongest symbolism in the story.



Characters

Elijah of Buxton

Elijah Freeman was the first baby to be born in the Settlement of Buxton, a fact of which he is very proud. He is a very sensitive boy and wants badly not to be seen by his mother or others as "fra-gile," but he cries very easily and becomes extremely frightened to the point of being disoriented. He is not quite twelve in this story, but is beginning to see what it might take to be respected as a grownup. He works very hard for a child, but he also plays freely, exploring the woods and lakes of the region. His proudest accomplishment is that he has taught himself how to "chunk" rocks with enough power and accuracy to kill a swimming fish or take down a vicious dog. He and his best friend Cooter are close, although Cooter seems to get into more trouble than Elijah.

Attached to Elijah is his reputation for being the first free-born baby in Buxton. However, his vomiting on one of the city fathers head as an infant has also earned him a reputation. Even though it was eleven years ago, he is still embarrassed by it.

Elijah is a good student. Because so many people in Buxton are still illiterate, he is called on often to read or write for them. His home life is stable and strong. His parents are strict, loving and very wise. Elijah knows the sounds, feelings and smells of nature.

Generally a really good boy, Elijah is not above telling a white lie, especially when it comes to the welfare of others. He has a huge heart and is very willing to help others. He seems drawn to the Preacher, even though he knows the Preacher does not do or say the right things. Elijah is intuitive, but does not always trust his intuition. Elijah is a hard-working boy who works in the horse stables after school, and helps Mr. Leroy in the evening chopping wood. He wants nothing more than to be looked upon as "growned" and has a loveable way of thinking things through.

Right Reverend Deacon Doctor Zephariah Connerly

Although the least likeable character in the story, the "Reverend" does play an important part in the plot. He is a con-man who, although somewhat clever, is of questionable morals. He tries to make himself a part of the Settlement citizens by pretending he is a pious preacher, but his actions speak differently.

The "Preacher" is a youngish man who shows up now and then at the Settlement, but does not live there. He speaks in Biblical terms, but his ways are sneaky and suspect. He claims to be a man of God as a way to get people to trust him, but he is generally up to no good. He frightens people with exaggerated tales of things like hoop snakes, and terrible weather.



Early in the story he tricks Elijah into giving him fish that had already been promised to others. He tantalizes Elijah by promising to let him shoot his gun, but does not come through. He uses false flattery and manipulation, but does recognize Elijah's intelligence. He is also impressed with Elijah's skill as a marksman with stones, and tries to find a way to capitalize on the boy's talents. He encourages Elijah to sneak out at night and takes him to a carnival, where he tries to sell Elijah as a carnival act for money. He steals a little boy from the carnival and takes him to Buxton, which gives the reader the idea that there may be something about him that is good.

When a pair of slavers are in the area, they mysteriously disappear and the Preacher ends up with a new gun that he claims to have found in the woods. In addition, their white horse comes into town, riderless and with blood on his flank. We later learn that the preacher actually has two matching guns, and can assume that he did away with the twins.

Mr. Leroy comes into a large sum of money with which he intends to buy his family out of slavery. The Preacher offers to take care of this for him, and implies he has connections who can help. He is not exactly trustworthy, but Leroy is desperate and asks him to make the trip. A neighbor who rides along with him realizes that the Preacher is going to take the money and gamble with it, and when he protests, the Preacher shoots him. The Preacher loses all of Mr. Leroy's money and he, himself, is killed.

Elijah's Parents

Spencer and Sarah Freeman are known as Ma and Pa throughout most of the story. They are great parents who are raising their boy to be smart, educated and strong. However, they do worry about Elijah's tendency to fall apart when things get sad or frightening. Sarah speaks to him about his being "fra-gile," and this seems to be a real concern for them. They are strict, but loving toward Elijah.

An illustration of family life is when Elijah and Cooter put a "toady-frog" in his Ma's knitting basket to frighten her. Rather than whip him, as seems to be the norm, they plant a snake in a cookie jar for him instead. Elijah is extremely afraid of snakes, and they teach him just how funny it is to frighten people with things of which they are already afraid.

Pa seems to be a well respected man in the settlement. Leroy comes to him when he doesn't know how to go about getting his family back. When the new refugees show up, it is Ma who takes the little boy to get him cleaned up. Like the other adults who do not know how to read and write, Ma takes classes at night. Elijah sums up his mother, saying, "Between cooking and cleaning and gardening and sewing and knitting and working the fields at harvest time and helping out at the chopping bees and the raising bees and tending to her sheep and shearing 'em and gathering wool and carding it and spinning it, Ma had been lazy and was slacking off on her school lessons and they weren't sticking particular good."



The couple arranged to take a group of people on a picnic at Lake Erie, and seem to be a strong fixture in the small community. It is not clear how Elijah's father got to Canada, but his mother's story is told on the buckboard on the way to the picnic. She has some sad memories of her mother, who wanted her daughter to be free more than she wanted to be near her. Elijah's father calls a town meeting to discuss Mr. Leroy's situation. The implication is that they are some of the earliest citizens to live at the Settlement and may be perceived to have some kind of seniority.

Mr. Leroy

Mr. Leroy is a very, very hardworking man who is saving his money to buy his family out of slavery. He has cleared Mrs. Holton's land by hand. The sound of his chopping can be heard throughout the settlement most of the time. He has a certain rhythm and makes particular sounds as he works which are powerful and impressive to the boys. When Mrs. Holton's husband is killed, she gives her gold to Mr. Leroy so that he can buy his family back. He becomes so distraught with anxiety that he makes the decision to let the Preacher handle it for him. Mr. Leroy is not in good health, and when the Preacher steals his money, he forces Elijah to go with him into the US to see if they can find it. Unfortunately, Mr. Leroy's heart gives out, and he never does see his money or his family again. He is a tragic figure who has gone through too much to engage in small talk. He is a giant of a man physically, but one could say his heart is broken over losing his family, and he is not able to endure. His anxiety is also due to the fact that he knows he doesn't have much time left.

Emmeline Holton

Mrs. Holton is the one person who came to the Settlement with money. She has been able to afford to have her land cleared and a house built that is embellished much more than the others by paying Mr. Leroy to do the work. She has two small daughters. Her husband, John, is a slave in Virginia, and she is waiting for him to join her. When she finds out that John has been whipped to death, she gives the money she has been saving to Mr. Leroy so that he can buy his family from slavery. Mr. Leroy carves a plaque for Mrs. Holton to commemorate her husband. She is a kind woman and a close friend to Elijah's mother.

Cooter Bixby

Cooter is Elijah's very best friend. They fish together and walk the woods around the settlement. Cooter is not as good a student as Elijah, and he gets into trouble at school. At one point in the story, the school teacher has visited Cooter's mother to discuss his behavior. When Elijah gets to Cooter's house, Cooter is not allowed to speak since he is pressed into the corner for being a "dunce" at school. He is Elijah's sidekick. When the story opens, he and Elijah are trying to solve the mystery of tracks they have found,



when the Preacher informs them that deadly hoop snakes are coming. Cooter is also in on the trick played on Elijah's mother when she finds a toady-frog in her knitting basket.

Cooter does not get along well with Mr. Travis, who is the school teacher and the Sabbath teacher. He does not show Mr. Travis the proper respect in town. As a result, Mr. Travis writes on the board, "Familiarity Breeds Contempt," and plans to have a lesson about respect. However, Cooter decides that the phrase means there is going to be a "family breeding contest." Mr. Travis almost twists Cooter's ear off, he is so angry.

Cooter does not get involved in the incident with the Preacher and Mr. Leroy because he is in trouble at home.

Mr. Travis

Mr. Travis is the Sabbath teacher, but is also currently sitting in as the school teacher. Elijah does not like this because Mr. Travis intertwines the two and, in a sense, knows too much about the students. For instance, at church he takes the opportunity to speak to Elijah and Cooter in Latin to remind them that they need to work on their Latin. He is a hot-tempered man. When Cooter fails to address him respectfully in town, and then misinterprets the lesson he has planned, he twists Cooter's ear too hard and completely loses his temper. He is not a terribly likeable character, but he is one of the authority figures in Elijah's life.

Frederick Douglass

One of the important people who visited Buxton when Elijah was a baby, Mr. Douglass was a freed slave and a giver of powerful speeches. When Elijah was a baby, Mr. Douglass was giving one of his animated speeches, holding Elijah and shaking him around, putting him up in the air when he made a point, and generally jostling him. Elijah vomited on Mr. Douglass's head, and the story has become embellished over the years. It is an embarrassment to Elijah that offsets his pride in being the first free born baby in Buxton.

Theo Highgate

The Highgates live in the Settlement and have one of the nicer homes. Mr. Highgate appears early in the story when he tries to find the slavers that are supposedly approaching Buxton in the woods. He has hurt his hand in the sawmill and is unable to work. When the white horse shows up at the Settlement, Mr. Highgate takes the horse to the Sheriff.

When Mr. Leroy decides to send the Preacher to get his family, Mr. Highgate agrees to accompany him for protection. Because of his injured hand, he is not currently working and is willing to go. Mr. Highgate is returned to the Settlement with a gunshot wound delivered by the Preacher, who steals Leroy's money from him to gamble. Mr. Highgate



is a good man; he did not know that the Preacher was a crook when he agreed to make the trip.

Emma Collins

Emma was the second free child born in Buxton. She is smart in school, like Elijah. She is asked to coax and welcome refugee slaves into the Settlement when they are hiding in the woods, because she is gentle and does not frighten them. Elijah pretends not to like Emma and feels that she is always competing with him, but she is a good and sweet little girl, who gives her doll to a little refugee girl to comfort her.

Reverend King

Reverend King is a white man who initiated the Settlement at Buxton after freeing his own slaves and helping them start a life of their own. He is mentioned several times in the story and was, in actuality, the person who bought the land and established the Settlement for runaway slaves.

Clarence Segee

Mr. Segee takes care of the stable and animals in the Settlement. He is the owner of Flapjack, Jingle Boy, Conqueror, Shirl and other horses that are borrowed by the residents of the settlement. Elijah thinks Mr. Segee has a rather strange sense of humor, but since he just came from Mississippi a year ago, Elijah tries to give him a little laugh when he says something he thinks is funny to allow for his newness there.

Mr. MacMahon

In Chatham, Mr. MacMahon owns the dry goods store. He is Scottish, and calls Elijah "laddy." He is missing one leg, and gets about on crutches. He has a strong Scottish brogue.

Flapjack the Mule

Flapjack is a pretty loyal animal, but has a mind of his own occasionally. Elijah tends to go on and on about how much better it is to ride a mule than a horse, because the ride is less bumpy and one is closer to the ground. He borrows Flapjack from the Settlement's stable when he needs to go any distance, and Flapjack has extra-sensory perception when it comes to strangers in the woods. Elijah knows him so well that he recognizes the mule's gestures and movements. On at least one occasion, Flapjack runs off without Elijah, but waits in the pasture for him. Flapjack is a delightful character. Elijah tries to describe what he looks like when he tries to run — "real stiff-legged and clumsiness-looking, but no other word but running would come to mind."



Mrs. Chloe, Too-mah-ee-nee (Hope) and Kamau

Elijah finds slaves chained up in a stable in the small logging village where he has found the Preacher. The woman slave, Mrs. Chloe, is holding her baby, Too-mah-ee-nee, whom she calls Hope; her African husband, Kamau is also in chains. Chloe says that Kamau claims to have been a king in Africa, and she believes him.

Elijah figures out that Mrs. Chloe is hoping he will take her baby to freedom and safety, even though he is unable to help the adult slaves to freedom.

MaWee

The shifty Reverend takes Elijah to the carnival where they meet a young boy called MaWee, who is normally employed as an assistant in a carnival act. For this particular carnival venue in Chatham, the owner has replaced him with a white boy, but he is still "owned" by Charles Mondial Vaughn the Fourth, Knight Commander of the Most Honorable Order of the Bath, known to MaWee as Massa Charles. The Preacher steals MaWee and takes him to freedom at Buxton, but MaWee does not understand what is free about having to go to school and being watched over by his new family.

Charles Mondial Vaughn the Fourth, Knight Commander of the M

This character, also known as "Massa Charles," is the owner of a carnival. He has purchased a slave boy whom he calls "MaWee," and employs him to assist Madame Sabbar in her slingshot act. The Preacher tries to make a deal with Massa Charles involving Elijah's "chunking" skills. When they cannot work out a deal, the Preacher puts a gun up Charles' nose and steals MaWee to take him to Buxton, where he will be free.

The Taylor Family

A family of runaway slaves from Arkansas slowly approaches Buxton, hiding in the woods. Emma Collins goes to them and gently coaxes them out of the woods. Spencer Freeman introduces them to their freedom, showing them the beautiful sky and land that is their new home. The family, almost hysterical with relief, hugs and wails. There are two children and a baby, a mother and a father. Emma Collins gives her little doll named Birdy to the little Taylor girl. The baby has been given too much "quieting medicine," and needs tending. The Taylors give the reader a chance to experience what it was like for a runaway slave to finally reach Buxton, to the sound of the ringing Liberty Bell and the welcome of the other freed slaves.



Miss Duncan the First and Miss Duncan the Second

When the Taylors arrive at Buxton, the Duncan sisters realize that the new arrival, Liza Taylor, is actually Alice Duncan, their blood sister, who was sold away from the family when she was young. They identify her by a scar she got as a child. They decide to wait a while to tell Liza this news, and Elijah is confused about why grownups would wait to tell such a thing.

Mrs. Brown

Mrs. Brown is a friend in Buxton who is a wonderful baker of pies. She lost a baby two years ago, and since that time has only worn black. Elijah sometimes sees her in the woods weeping and talking to something that is not there. She cannot stop mourning. When Elijah takes the baby from Mrs. Chloe, he uses the story of Mrs. Brown to describe his mother, and knows that when he brings the baby to the Settlement that he will give her to Mrs. Brown. He feels Mrs. Brown will some day soon buy some dress fabric with color in it.



Objects/Places

Elgin Settlement at Buxton

In 1848 in Ontario, Canada, Reverend William King established a 4300 acre settlement to help fugitive slaves who had escaped their masters in America. This part of the story is not fiction. The first residents were fifteen freed slaves who had been "owned" by Reverend King and his wife. A well-organized community, Buxton grew over time, as more and more runaway slaves learned about the settlement and its promise of safety. The settlement had rules regarding how they would treat the properties and work together. For example, every house was required to have garden space in the back, a picket fence in front, and at least four rooms. Most of the fugitives had lived in small shacks in the southern part of the US before they came to Buxton.

The residents eventually established a school that was so good, it was attended by white students, as well. Children had to help with chores, and adults were able to attend school if they chose. A brickyard, a gristmill, and a tramway for logs were built in Buxton, and many businesses opened in the small community.

Elijah, in this novel, is the first free-born child in the Settlement, a very special designation.

Chatham

Chatham is the closest city to the Settlement and is made up of predominantly white farmers. Chatham has a post office, as well as Mr. MacMahon's dry goods store. Elijah likes to ride Flapjack when he goes into Chatham on errands.

Chunking

This is what Elijah calls his sharpshooting skill of throwing rocks at targets. He has become so accurate with chunking stones that he can kill fish and knock out a dog with one throw. His ability to knock out a mean dog with one rock allowed him to rescue baby Hope.

Toady Frogs and Snakes

Elijah is unreasonably afraid of snakes. Seeing a snake causes him to cry and become weak and frightened, a condition that he is trying to overcome. His mother has the same fear of "toady-frogs." He plants a toady-frog in his mother's knitting basket, which frightens her terribly and is cause for great laughter for Elijah and Cooter. However, Elijah does not think it so funny when his mother puts a snake in a cookie jar to surprise him.



Early in the story the Preacher frightens the boys with tales of a deadly "hoop" snake that has come to Buxton, and has left tracks in the dirt.

Guns

The Preacher carries a rusty, older gun, as well as the fancy pistol that he has stolen off of a slaver that he has probably killed in the woods. He claims to have found the pistol in the woods, but The Preacher leaves his fancy pistol in Buxton, just to show his good intentions; but later he reveals an identical pistol, which implies that he had both of the slavers, who were twin brothers.

Elijah, who has something of a fascination with guns, takes the fancy pistol from the Preacher's body and gives it to Chloe, the woman who is chained in a stable in the logging village where Elijah and Mr. Leroy have gone to find Mr. Leroy's money.

Superstitions

The Preacher vaguely accuses Elijah of conjuring when he sees how accurately he can "chunk" rocks, but later decides that it is actually a gift from the Lord. In any case, it has to be one or the other. The mesmer at the carnival supposedly is able to conjure.

When Elijah is in the dark stable with Chloe, they both question whether the other one is real or a "haint." Superstitions are prominent in slave communities and there are still many superstitious influences in the freed community of Buxton.

School

Like any free children, school takes up a lot of Elijah's life. He is very good at his studies, although he could use some improvement in his Latin. His teacher, who is also his Sabbath teacher, is a harsh man who is a major authority figure in the lives of the children. He is able to freely punish the children without any objection from the parents, and, in the case of Cooter, his negative reports are reason for the parents to punish the children, as well. Mr. Travis is abusive in his discipline and, even when one of the children gets his father from the field because he thinks Mr. Travis is going to kill Cooter, his father is angry with him and apologizes to the teacher.

School is a special privilege for the children in Buxton, since none of the adults are literate. The adults are required to study reading and writing, but it is much more difficult for them, and they rely on kids like Elijah to do their reading and writing for them.

Fragility and Crying

Elijah has a problem with falling apart when something frightens him or when something is sad. He tries very hard not to cry, but he feels it coming on and cannot stop it. It is a



source of irritation for him, since he is trying to act like a grownup. He cries when Mrs. Holton gives Mr. Leroy her money, he cries when his mother compliments him on how well he delivers the sad news to Mrs. Holton. He actually passes out when he becomes too frightened, and falls on the ground, but he is learning to keep his mouth shut when he hits so he doesn't get dirt in his mouth. He does this when he thinks Mr. Leroy is after him, and also in the stable when he realizes that the "bundles" on the wall are alive. Emma Collins also cries easily, and Elijah is quick to note that, since there is a sense of competition between them. His parents have tried to talk him out of being so fragile, knowing he will face a lot of situations in his life that will require him to be strong.

Carnival in Chatham

The Preacher encourages Elijah to sneak out of his room at night and go with him to the carnival in Chatham, the nearby city. He tells Elijah that he might be able to be of some help to the Settlement, but what he is really hoping is that Elijah can make some money for him. For a boy raised in such simple surroundings, the carnival is a kaleidoscope of sounds, smells and sights, much of it seedy and false. The magic of the carnival is all contrived, and gives Elijah a glimpse into the reality of that kind of world. The positive aspect of the carnival adventure is that the Preacher brings little MaWee to Buxton to live as a free boy.

The Preacher tries to sell Elijah as "Ahbo," an orphan who has no family, but is unable to strike a deal with the carnival owner.

Freedom

The image of people crossing over into freedom is breathtakingly described in this novel. It is difficult to imagine the pain and suffering of slavery that is so extreme that a mother would give away her baby to spare her that suffering. This is what happened to Elijah's mother, Sarah, and this is what Chloe did with her baby, Hope.

The Taylor family's almost hysterical reaction to realizing they are free is stunning. It is also important in the story that people who have lived as slaves carry a lot of painful baggage with them that needs to be respected by others. "...once someone was a slave there's always gonna be a something in 'em that knows parts 'bout life that freeborn folks caint never know, mostly horrific parts."

The transition is so intense and poignant, that the Settlement has a ceremony that involves rubbing the community's Liberty Bell, as a gesture of new freedom. They are asked to look at the sky and the land and each other, and to see how beautiful everything is when it is free.



Logging Village

An hour outside of Detroit, the logging village is where the Preacher wants to go with Mr. Highgate to find the man who can help get Mr. Leroy's family back. However, when they reach the village, the Preacher takes Mr. Leroy's money for gambling, and shoots Mr. Highgate. The man who arranges to get Mr. Highgate back to Buxton is a Mr. Alston, who, although he does this for Mr. Highgate, is really no help when it comes to retrieving Mr. Leroy's money.

In the village is the East Lee Stable where Elijah finds the body of the Preacher, as well as Chloe and her family.

Ferry

A ferry runs between Detroit and Windsor, Ontario, Canada. Elijah takes Jingle Boy on the ferry to get to the logging village outside of Detroit, and goes on it again back to Canada with baby Hope. It crosses the Detroit River, with the US on one side, and Canada on the other.

Age

The slaves, and former slaves, in this story do not live to a very old age. Mr. Leroy is not old when he dies from a heart attack; he has worked too hard all his life and has worn himself out. When Elijah sees Chloe and Kamau in the stable, he notes that they look beaten down. He says he will remember the sound of the chains in the stable, even if he lives to be fifty. When the Taylors arrive, Mrs. Taylor looks much older than she really is because she has had five children and is only about twenty-six.

Church

Church is not a pleasant time for Elijah. He would rather do hard labor than sit in church all day. He says that Reverend King's sermons make him "...feel like begging, 'Take me now, Jesus,' 'bout halfway through 'em." The final "Amen" is about the only one into which Elijah and Cooter can put any enthusiasm, and he feels Reverend Travis stands at the door to ambush everyone.

Picnic

Most of the community rides on a buckboard to Lake Erie in Chapter 14. They are like a large family, and a picnic is a special time for them. In this instance, Mrs. Holton has recently received the news that her husband has passed away. They spread out blankets on the sand and eat fried chicken and pie. The children play "slavers and abolitionists," like American children play cowboys and Indians.



Peach Pie

Elijah lets the reader know early on that his mother is not a good baker. Her cooking is tolerable, but compared to Mrs. Brown, her pies are awful. When the community goes to Lake Erie for a picnic, Elijah's father buries his piece of peach pie in the sand, and asks Elijah to bury it deeper for him when no one is looking, so that no animal will dig it up and die a slow, horrible death.

Slavers

The twin "slavers" who are thought to be roaming the woods are white men on white horses with fancy pistols. Slavers are like monsters for the people in Buxton. They are looking for runaway slaves so that they can capture and either return them for a price to their owners, or sell them for money. They are worthy of killing, and are the object of the children's games of abolitionist and slaver. The slaves who are chained up in the stable have been caught by slavers. They are cruel, ruthless and do not see African Americans as people, but as wild animals to be trapped and captured.

Scars

Most of the former slaves carry scars on their bodies, as well as their souls. Mr. Leroy has a brand burned into his skin. Many of the adults have scars on their ankles from being chained. Even Alice Duncan has a scar from pulling a frying pan on herself when she was small. Elijah's mother still feels the sting of her mother's slaps on her face when she was young. Elijah's father tells him that people who have been slaves are carrying around emotional baggage that most people cannot imagine.

Birdy the Doll

Emma Collins has a doll that is made out of a stuffed sock. It is tied around the neck and has buttons for eyes and mouth. Its hair is made from braided yarn. "Emma'd gone and put little ribbons on the end of each plait and had made the doll a blue dress and a red apron. Total all them things together and you end up with a frightsome mess that's likely to give you nightmares." But, Emma carries it everywhere except school. She puts a flower in the doll's apron and offers it to the new little Taylor girl, who is frightened and shy, and tells her that she can be the doll's new mother. The doll's name is Birdy.

Lions in Sweden

The carnival act of Madame Sabbar claims that she, as a royal huntress, has slain 541 Swedish Moth Lions with her slingshot. When someone objects that there are no lions in Sweden, the carnival man says that it is proof that Madame Sabbar has wiped out the entire lot of them.



Themes

Slavery

The issues of slavery, and freedom from it, predominate this story. Although this is an uplifting tale written with a substantial degree of humor, the horrors of slavery in America are shown starkly through the narration of the first free-born black boy in Buxton. William King's vision of a haven for runaway slaves turned into a thriving Settlement where those who were lucky enough to get away, could live their lives in safety, freedom and self-respect.

The misery of the southern slave comes through in many ways. Mr. Leroy is a quiet man who has suffered terribly and wants nothing more than to free his family. He carries pain around with him that is vented in his hard labor. A gentle man, he slaps young Elijah to the ground for using a racist word that has stung him all his life.

Elijah's mother, Sarah, tells Mrs. Holton the story of her escape to Canada, when her mother made it clear that she would rather kill Sarah than see her miss a chance to escape slavery — an extremely powerful statement. The Taylors have been running for so long that they are delirious to realize they have reached Buxton. Like Mrs. Taylor, many of them do not even know their background or heritage because their families have been split apart and sold off. A bond forms between Sarah and Mrs. Holton when they realize that they lived in the same region when they were slaves.

Elijah, on the other hand, who is born free, is now challenged to learn what it means to be mature and strong, without having been through anything traumatic in his life. His parents are concerned about his sensitivity because, compared to those who have been enslaved, his life has been easy. Elijah is able to focus on more on the quality of his life and education, since he has no master to whom he must answer.

This novel is an important reminder to those of us who were born free and never faced the reality, or the residuals, of slavery.

Morality and Trust

Elijah is being raised to be a trustworthy, moral young man. However, as his parents know, there is much about the world that is immoral. The settlement, filled with people who are grateful and happy just to be alive, is a cloistered environment of trust and love. They are all raising their children to be hard-working, responsible, compassionate and religious. They are following rules that make the Settlement a wholesome place to live.

However, there are people like the Preacher who are opportunistic and dishonest. Although Elijah is drawn to the Preacher, he recognizes that there is something about the man that is not good. His father knows the Preacher is not a good man and calls him a "jackleg." However, since the Preacher tries to be one of them, and talks as



though he is a man of God, Mr. Leroy trusts him with his money. When Mr. Highgate comes home with a bullet wound, he just cannot believe the Preacher actually shot him on purpose. To these folks, the enemy is the white slaveholder, not one of their own.

The trusting Elijah almost gets sold to the carnival by the Preacher, and does not even really realize what has happened until it is over. The population in the world outside of Buxton — the carnival, Detroit and the US, is portrayed as dangerous and seedy compared to the comfort and safety of the Settlement. Unfortunately, the former slaves have every reason to feel this way, having been abused and exploited.

Joys of Childhood

In this story, Elijah is having the opportunity of living like children should be able to live - free and happy. Although he is aware of the backgrounds of the people who surround him, he can not possibly understand how fortunate he is to be able to play in the woods, go fishing when he wants, get an education and generally say and do as he pleases. His parents are strict and want to instill in him the values of hard work and integrity, but he will not learn these at the end of a whip. His life lessons will come without the sting of being trapped by another human being. He sees the events in his life as adventures and only grasps the realities of slavery when he is in the stable with Mrs. Chloe and the other slaves who are shackled with thick iron around their ankles and chains attached to a stone wall. At that time he realizes that these people are the same as his own family, except that they have to worry about "shotguns and chains and coughing little babies and crying folks without no clothes. Folks that were the same as me and Ma and Pa, 'cepting they were near dead. 'Cepting they gave off a sad, peculiar smell. 'Cepting they were chained in a way that I ain't never seen even the wildest, worstest animal chained." Only by experiencing this horrid situation was a free child able to grasp the value of his free childhood. Elijah vows never to play slavers and abolitionists again, because he knows the basis of the game and feels he would not be brave enough to even pretend about this horrific situation.

Coming of Age

Elijah describes himself as ten months away from being twelve. He is closer in this story to being ten than twelve, but he feels it is time for him to start learning what it means to be "growned." Part of growing up, for Elijah, means learning to control his emotions. He tends to cry very easily, and he faints when he is frightened, often waking up with a mouthful of dirt. His parents do not ridicule him, but want him to be stronger so that he can face adulthood with courage.

Each event that takes place in the story makes Elijah a little stronger. His mother and father terrify him with a snake, and the Preacher frightens him with a tale of hoop snakes coming to the area. He also learns that it is easier to laugh at others' fear than at his own when his mother frightens him with a snake.



He tells about having to wait at school when slavers were heard to be in the area, and how the farmers came out of the fields to fetch their children. He learns a little too much from the Preacher about guns and superstitions, and his experience at the carnival was a huge eye-opener for a bright little boy. He gets through the rage of his school teacher, and talks with love about the new runaways who find their freedom in Buxton. He listens to the sad tale of his mother's childhood and her escape to freedom, and is designated to read the letter to Mrs. Holton about her husband's death. Finally, becoming involved with Mr. Leroy in trying to recover a large amount of money, and then having Mr. Leroy die while they are in America make Elijah braver and stronger than he, himself could have imagined, even though he does cry and faint over the slaves shackled in the stable.

By the end of the story, Elijah has been forced to have more courage than most children his age, and has triumphantly managed to free a small baby from a terrible fate, none of which he could have done if he were truly fra-gile.



Style

Point of View

The story is told through the narration of an eleven year old boy, Elijah, who is the first child to be born free in the Buxton Settlement. Through his narration and dialogue, the story unfolds with the welcome enrichment of Elijah's tender feelings and thoughts, as well as his delightful sense of humor. Elijah's goal is primarily to become more grown up, which in his case means that he will try to stop crying when things upset him, and stop fainting when he is frightened. His family believes he is a "fra-gile" child, and Elijah manages to make progress in the story toward having more courage and becoming less fragile. The story is a running chronicle of a relatively short period of time in which eleven-year old Elijah is challenged and moved by the events around him.

Setting

The story is set, for the most part, in the settlement of Buxton in Ontario, Canada. The Settlement is a number of acres that has been bought and designated for runaway slaves to build a free community for themselves and their children. The story of the Settlement is based in fact. Elijah's trips to Detroit follow a route that is also based in fact, crossing the Detroit River on a ferry between Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Canada.

The Settlement is a group of homes that are each built on acreage that is cleared and drained by the residents. There are woods surrounding the Settlement, but the homes have flowers in front and vegetable gardens in back. The residents work hard on their properties and they are a tightly-knit community. Each property is required to have a drainage ditch dug around the perimeter. Mrs. Holton employs Mr. Leroy and Elijah to do some of the clearing and chopping on her property, since her husband has not joined her yet.

Elijah and his friend Cooter spend a lot of time in the woods and go fishing from a creek in the woods. The woods create something of a veil around the community; slavers are caught in the woods, and refugees appear from the woods.

Language and Meaning

The language that is customary among the Settlement's population at this time in history goes a long way toward lending authenticity to the story. Although Elijah is becoming well-educated, there are still many grammatical shortcuts and dialect that are left over from the slavery days of the adults in the community. In addition, Elijah comes up with words that make sense, such as "speechifying" and "terrorific." The narration is detailed and descriptive, and brings the reader into Elijah's world at his level. It is easy to determine that Elijah is a very smart and sensitive boy, not because he tells us so, but



because of the things he says and conclusions he draws. The writing flows seamlessly and is easy to read; there is no language that is obscure or deep, but there are many layers to the story. Although the novel is designated for a young adult audience, it is appropriate for all age levels and anyone who enjoys historical fiction.

Structure

This wonderful novel is divided into twenty-four chapters of varying lengths, each entitled according to the story it contains. Although the individual stories are somewhat discreet, the novel's plot progresses and is cohesive. Each chapter reveals more about the people of Buxton, how they live, and their values.

The novel is 341 pages long, and contains added notes from the author and After Words that describe the historical Settlement of Buxton.



Quotes

"She squozed on my shoulders 'cause being fra-gile's the biggest bone Ma's got to pick with me. There ain't nothing in the world she wants more than for me to quit being so doggone fra-gile. It's something I'm aiming to do myself..."

Pg 10

"Ma! I thought we were trying to make it so's I wouldn't be so fra-gile! Look at me, I cain't quit shaking! I could see I was wasting my breath. If people could die from laughing too hard, I'd be a orphan. I know it probably ain't right to feel this way 'bout your own ma and pa, but i was sore disappointed in the way they were acting."

Pg 21

"I learnt from Ma that people who used to be slaves love prettying up any kind of story. She says talking is near the only thing they use to get to do without no white person telling 'em how or when, so they make the most out of it once they get the chance. She says they love making a summer day a lot hotter than it really was, or making rain or drought last a whole lot longer than they really did, and they 'specially love telling you how their great-great-grampa or gramma used to be the king or queen of Africa."

Pg 26

"I'd been meaning to ask our Sabbath school teacher, Mr. Travis, if it was blaspheming to say this, but seemed to me if this rock chunking really was a gift from Jesus, it would be the sort of thing that would be there forever, and for me it weren't atall. This was a gift that needed lots of practicing else it went away."

Pg 41

"That's one of the main reasons don't no one like Emma, she thought it was funny to speak to a mule afore she spoke to me. Just like Philip Wise, she ain't never got over that I was the first child born free in Buxton. Ma and Emma's ma were in a race to see who was gonna be firstborn and Emma didn't come out till six days after me. Since me and Ma won the race, Emma's always let the sin of envy choke her heart."

Pg 157

"After a harsh forced journey to Applewood, John was brought back into servitude. Much to our horror, to set an example and in retaliation for the gold he claims John stole, Mr. Tillman exacted a punishment so severe that due to the rigors of the march home, John's body could not endure and he went to the loving arms of our Savior on the seventh day of the fifth month in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred fifty-nine."

Pg 196

"'Cause if they takes you to De-troit ever again and you don't head out for Canada, you ain't got no more right to live than one n'em chickens. You ain't got no more sense than one n'em yard birds what's happy to hang 'round till it they turn to get slaughtered. If you gets another chance and don't take it...or die trying...I swear girl, I'll kill you myself once



you get back here."
Pg. 211

"The body is not made to endure. There's something inside so strong it flies forever."
Pg 221

"She said, 'Carry your bag to Cooter's room, Elijah. And don't be trying to talk to that dunce neither. Another thing he gunn be doing till he turn thirty is keeping his mouth shut.' 'Yes, ma'am.'"
Pg. 258

"I ain't disputing that I'm a whole lot smarter than most other children who're near 'bout twelve years old, but I couldn't for anything see how come a river made so much difference. How could one side of the river mean you were free and the other side mean you were a slave? When you looked at the trees in Canada and the trees in America, they seemed to be the same trees, like they could've come out of one seed. Same with the rocks and the houses an the horses and everything else that I could compare, but the growned folks could see big differences that warent plain to me."
pg. 278

"First thing that came to mind was Pa telling me that I didn't never have to worry 'bout no barking dog, that it was barking 'cause it was just as scared as me. He said it was the quiet dog I had to be afeared of. That was the kind of dog that warent interested in scaring no one, it was only looking to bite something big and meaty off of you."
Pg 287

"The Preacher was better at this standing-still business than me. He didn't move a finger. He kept his arms up there patient as a rock, quiet as a scarecrow. But something just warent right. I started stealing closer to him one slow step at a time."
Pg. 293

"The rest of 'em were men and they warent wearing nothing atall, not even a rag. Their ankles were covered with the same kind of thick iron shackles as the woman's. Their eyes were all on me and they were looking just as scared and confused and surprised 'bout seeing me as I was 'bout seeing them. The four-armed woman hissed again, 'Is you a real boy?' I warent sure how to answer her. If she was a haint and thought that I was one too, she might not do nothing to me. 'Sides, who else but a haint's gonna have four arms? But if she warent a haint and I told her I was one, maybe she'd put some kind a haint-killing conjure on me and I'd be dead anyway."
Pg 297

"I dipped the gourd into the water and raised it to the man's lips so he could drink. His eyes were blood red and swole up and crusted so's you'd've thought he'd had a good, long, hard cry. But there was something in his eyes that told you that this warent the kind of man that was likely to be bawling, no matter what happened to him."
Pg 301



"I pulled my hand away and all the sudden I knowed what the odd smell in the stable was. It was fear. It was the smell of five growned folks and one baby that were afeared of everything."

Pg. 303

"The next thing that came into my heart made it sink right down into my brogans. There warent no clothes on the Preacher 'cepting for a bloody rag round his knees. Mr. Leroy's money must be all gone!"

Pg 306

"All I could say was, 'I was wondering, ma'am, if maybe you'd let me borrow your baby and carry her to Buxton so I could show Ma how much she favors my sister?' Mrs. Chloe's eyes looked just like Mr. Travis's did if you got all the way through conjugating your Latin verbs without no mistakes."

"She told me, 'Dont you cry boy. Don't you dare. I ain't never loved nothing in my life more'n I loves you right at this minute. Ain't nothing for you to be crying 'bout. Only reason any of us need be crying is if, come tomorrow, you warent nothing but a dream, nothing but my mind conjuring something to stop me from doing what I was gunn have to do. But you is real, ain't you?'"

Pg. 335

"Afore I stepped through the door, Mrs. Chloe said, 'Boy. What you called?'

I said, 'Elijah, ma'am.'

Then, so if she did bust out and got to Canada, she wouldn't make the mistake of asking for the other Elijah, the white one up in Chatham, I told her, 'I'm Elijah, Elijah of Buxton, ma'am.'

She said, 'Well, son, you done proved what you said afore. You proved that if you wants something horrible bad enough, sometimes dreams has a way of finding you. You done lift something heavier than any wagon of stones off my heart, Elijah of Buxton. Thank you.'"

Pg 337

"Now look at yourself, have you ever seen someone that looked so gorgeous? Today you're truly free, and you choosed the most beutifullest, most perfectest day for doing it! I raised her over my head and said, 'All I'm wondering is, what kept you?' She smiled at me, reached her hands down at my face, then spit up water all over me. Even though most times getting throwed up on ain't the kind of thing you're gonn laugh 'bout, I did anyway. I wiped my face off, pulled on Jingle Boy's reins, and led him up the ramp to the ferry."

Pg 341



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the competition between Elijah and Emma Collins. Is it real? If so, who participates the most in the competition? Do you feel Elijah and Emma are similar, as Sarah says?

Discuss Elijah's relationship with Flapjack. Is Flapjack exceptionally smart for a mule? Why does Elijah prefer riding Flapjack when there are faster horses available?

Are the stories that people tell about the Preacher killing the twin white men just "prettied up" versions of the truth? Discuss your reasons for your answer and give supporting details for your opinion. Note Mr. Highgate's comments on page 243.

Talk about Mr. Leroy, including his eating habits, his anger toward Elijah for using the "N" word, and his life. Summarize the character. How do you feel about Mr. Leroy? Has the author encouraged us to feel anything about him?

Do you think Elijah was in danger when he was at the carnival with the Preacher? Why or why not? What were the Preacher's intentions? What purpose does it serve the reader to have the Preacher "rescue" MaWee?

What were Chloe's plans if Elijah had not appeared in the stable? How did she plan to keep her promise to Hope? At what point does it become clear that she had a plan? How did Elijah's intervention change her plan?

Everyone who learns that Mrs. Holton has received a letter from Virginia has a reaction to it. Why does everyone assume it is bad news? Discuss the letter and its news, as well as the content. Is Ms. Poole a compassionate woman?

Explain the concept of "A Ball Starts Rolling" as it pertains to Mr. Leroy, and then to Elijah. What does he mean by this - what is the implication? What is its effect on the characters?

What are some of the parallels drawn in this story? Compare Chloe and Sarah Freeman's mother. Compare Mrs. Brown and Chloe. Compare Hope and Mrs. Freeman. Find other parallels drawn by the author that might not be so obvious.

What does Elijah feel he will accomplish by bringing the baby, Hope, to Buxton? Do you think this series of events has changed Elijah? If so, decide in what ways it has affected him, and provide support for your opinion.