

# From Slave Ship to Freedom Road Short Guide

## From Slave Ship to Freedom Road by Julius Lester

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## Overview

Julius Lester writes about the slave experience in *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*. In a very personal work, he urges himself and the reader to ask penetrating questions about man's treatment of his fellow man. He asks the question, What was it like to be a slave?

He asks the reader to be introspective. The text addresses the emotions, behaviors, and events depicted in the paintings of Rod Brown.

Brown's thirty-six paintings, executed in acrylics, provide the stimulus for the questions that provoke the reader to respond.

The paintings are vivid and filled with powerful emotion. They are historically accurate and may be startling to the reader at first glance. Lester leads the reader through the slave experience beginning with the transport aboard three-masted ships, to the auction block in ports in the South, and on to the plantation owners' fields, where they suffer from the hard labor inflicted on them.

The pictures and text depict a proud people who yearn for freedom and the opportunity to learn. The reader is asked to empathize with the slaves and the indignities they suffered and the abuse they received at the hands of the plantation owners when they escaped and then were caught and returned to the owners. Other slaves were forced to watch as the truant was subjected to merciless and inhumane punishment: Those who believed that owning people was wrong risked life and property to protect and help the runaway make his way to freedom. Sometimes that freedom was found by crossing the border into Canada. Sometimes it was found in the mountains of North Carolina, where they were taken in by Cherokee Indians. Sometimes freedom lay in Florida, to which slaves from Georgia and Alabama could flee and be saved because Florida belonged to Spain until 1819 and was outside the laws of the United States. Sometimes Virginia slaves ran away into the Great Dismal Swamp, where they disappeared into a forbidding and almost impenetrable region.

Many slaves were caught and ran away again and again. Some were successful in their escape. Others died because of disease and exposure to great risks and dangers.

When the Civil War started in 1861, both free blacks and slave blacks knew they needed to be involved in the struggle. They believed it should not be only white men risking their lives on the battlefield. Frederick Douglass persuaded President Abraham Lincoln that blacks should be allowed to join the Union Army and fight. President Lincoln finally agreed, and an all-black regiment was formed.

When the end finally arrived and slaves were freed, they had to learn what it meant to be free. They had no land, no houses, no possessions, no money, no education. What were they supposed to do with freedom?



The final painting portrays a proud people marching into the future, with joy, courage, determination, and perhaps a little trepidation, to discover the answer. Brown's characters seem to say, "We are going to learn how to be free."

## About the Author

Julius Lester, son of a Methodist minister, was born January 27, 1939, in Saint Louis, Missouri. After earning a B.A. in English from Fisk University in 1960, he became a political activist involved in the civil rights struggle to desegregate the South and bring about social change. He was a professional musician and singer in the 1960s and worked in radio and television before pursuing a career in higher education. He was professor of Afro-American studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst from 1971 to 1988; from 1982 to the present, he has been a professor of Near Eastern and Judaic studies and has held other positions in academia as well.

Lester has written, edited, and compiled numerous books for children, young people, and adults. His works have received numerous awards, including the Newbery Honor Book Award in 1969 for *To Be a Slave*.

His works have been translated into seven languages.

Although he began as a political activist, he wanted to write. After the publication of his first book, *The 12-String Guitar as Played by Leadbelly: An Instructional Manual*, which he co-authored with Pete Seeger in 1965, he wrote several adult books on political themes, including *The Angry Children of Malcolm X* (1966); *Look Out Whitey, Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama!* (1968); and a book of photographs and poems, *The Mud of Vietnam* (1967).

In 1969 he followed the advice of an editor at Dial Press and started writing children's books. He wanted to inform young black people about their heritage.

He published two books that year, *To Be a Slave* and *Black Folktales*. He often focuses on black experience in the rural Deep South.

Many of his books are set during the time of slavery and the Reconstruction period after the Civil War. In *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, he tackles the issue of slavery from the ship and voyage through the plantations of the South and on toward hope of freedom. In *Twentieth Century Children's Writers*, he says that history is "the lives of people more than... the recording of politics and wars," and he describes his work as an effort "to explore and illumine the lives of ordinary men and women, who are history."

Quoted in *Something About the Author*, Lester says: Children's literature is the one place where you can tell a story.... Just, straight, tell a story, and have it received as narrative without any literary garbage. I've done a fair amount of historically-based fiction that would be derided as adult literature because it's not 'sophisticated.' I'm just telling a story about people's lives. In children's literature, I can do that.

## Setting

The book begins in the pre-Civil War South and continues until the end of that war as it nearly tears the United States apart. It is a period of great growth in agriculture. Land owners in the South, eager to satisfy the world's thirst for cotton, are catering to a global market and competing against India's cotton production. These owners find cheap labor in slaves and freely traffic in slave labor for several decades as they eagerly seek profits. They become wealthy at the expense of human beings.

It is a time when these same people, who call themselves Christians, rationalize their actions. They convince themselves that black people are better off being slaves, that they are an inferior race and therefore destined to serve white men. It is a flawed belief system that allows land owners to profit from the misery of their fellow man. It is a belief system that fuels a cessation fever among the southern states and sets the stage for a great civil war.

It is a period of time when some brave people speak out against slavery and cessation and are willing to risk their fortunes and their lives to hold the Union together.

# Social Sensitivity

From Slave Ship to Freedom Road is history, but it is very relevant to young people today. There is still much discussion about racism, justice, and equality, not just for black people but for all peoples. We are a country of many nationalities. Lester's book can promote dialogue among young people and invite them to examine themselves.

The story may open some wounds for those who are bigoted or who live with bigotry. From Slave Ship to Freedom Road can provide the forum for an honest examination of one's own bigotry.

# Literary Qualities

Julius Lester has created a unique work.

He writes in a first-person voice with a conversational tone. It is as if the reader and Julius Lester are seated together in an intimate setting while he pours out his heart and implores the reader to involve himself in the "story." He is "begging, pleading, imploring [the reader] not to be passive, but to invest soul and imagine yourself into the images." Lester and Rod Brown want the reader "to come to terms with a historical experience whose legacy continues to affect us all."

There are short vignettes that explore Brown's paintings. Other pages of text are exercises that tug at the reader's mind, soul, and sensitivities as he dips deep within to answer the hard questions posed by Lester.

Sometimes we hear the voices of the slaves as they endure the "crossing," the indignities of the auction block, their pleading cries as children, wives, and husbands are separated and sold because the price of cotton is down and the "master" must make a profit.

Other times we hear Lester's voice as he meditates on the paintings and imagines what the characters in them are thinking or saying.

Still other times we hear our own voices as we yield to Lester's promptings and questions and give ourselves over to listening to the characters in the paintings.

The paintings are of equal importance with the text. Using acrylics and a realistic artistic style, Brown conveys the deep emotions felt by the slaves. The attentive and sensitive reader empathizes with the trials, pain, sorrow, humiliation, agony, hope, determination, and courage that Brown has captured in the expressions and body language of his subjects. Paintings and text complement each other and, together, tell a greater story than either does alone.

Neither Lester nor Brown flinches from the horrors of slavery. The book needs the direction of a caring adult to assist students to fully understand it. It would also work well in a curriculum study of the Holocaust and racism.





# Themes and Characters

Themes of strength and endurance permeate the text of this book. Lester's questions to the reader and Brown's paintings depict the strength of character, hope, and endurance that black people possess.

There is also a spirit of hope and resistance. Lester's questions for the reader lead him to examine the paintings and really see the emotions portrayed in the expressions and body language of the people. While the slaves do the "master's" bidding, they are at the same time waiting for the opportunity to be free. The reader sees the dignity in their bearing.

Lester's purpose is to lead the reader from painting to painting and ask penetrating questions that evoke empathetic emotions. He wants the reader to think deeply.

Sometimes the questions are for whites, other times they are for blacks, and sometimes the questions are for both. Lester writes from his own deep emotions and imagination about what it would have been like to be a slave, and he asks the reader to do the same.

Since this is not a novel, there is no main character. Instead, we see groups and individuals in Brown's paintings, which draw the reader into the mind and experience of slaves. Brown spent seven years working on thirty-six paintings about slavery, and many of them are included in this book.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Complete "Imagination Exercise One: For White People" on page 10 of From Slave Ship to Freedom Road.
2. Complete "Imagination Exercise Two: For African Americans" on page 15.
3. Complete "Imagination Exercise Three: For Whites and Blacks" on page 22.
4. On page 28, Lester addresses the concept of what it means to be human.

What does it mean to be human?

5. How do you respond to people different from yourself?
6. Are you willing to protect the rights of all peoples under just laws that provide for equal treatment of people? What are you willing to risk or sacrifice to protect those rights?
7. Would you risk going to jail for someone you do not know?
8. Choose a painting and the text accompanying it. How do the two work together to better inform the reader?
9. Read the conversation on page 28 between slave and master. Is the master really sorry? Explain your answer.
10. Elaborate on the statement on page 30: "There are many more fears than there are rivers, and fears are harder to wade through." Look at the questions following that statement. Answer them.
11. What is freedom? What does freedom mean to you?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Choose a painting and write about your thoughts and reactions to it.
2. Find other paintings on the same subject. Compare them with Rod Brown's paintings. A good choice for comparison is *The Middle Passage* (1995), a wordless book by Tom Feelings.
3. Page 21 tells about running away. Choose one of the destinations of runaway slaves and research it. Create a map showing the route that slaves might have taken.
4. Because of Frederick Douglass's pleading, President Lincoln allowed the formation of a black regiment to fight in the war effort. Find out about that regiment. Choose a medium for sharing with classmates.
5. Among the people who helped slaves escape were the Quakers. Find out about their work. Choose a way to compile the information you gather and share it with classmates.
6. The Underground Railroad served as a route to freedom in Canada. Find maps or create maps showing the routes that slaves might have taken if they used the Underground Railroad to escape.
7. Harriet Tubman helped many slaves escape to freedom. Read about her. Create a documentary about her life and videotape it to share with classmates.

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## Related Titles/Adaptations

Lester has addressed the issue of slavery in other works. Three that are appropriate for young adults are *Long Journey Home: Stories from Black History*, *This Strange New Feeling*, and *To Be a Slave*.

*Long Journey Home* consists of six true stories from black history about ordinary people and their extraordinary lives.

*This Strange New Feeling* is a collection of short stories about slaves who escaped slavery by running away or by being purchased and given a measure of freedom. Some of the stories are based on actual events.

*To Be a Slave* was a 1969 Newbery Honor Book. At age ten, Lester was told by his father that their family's history went back to a bill of sale and no further. About fifteen years later, he began compiling the words of ex-slaves. The result, *To Be a Slave*, is a compilation of the reminiscences of slaves and ex-slaves about their experiences, from the leaving of Africa through the Civil War and into the early twentieth century, arranged chronologically.

A fourth title is one that was not written by Lester but is extremely relevant: Tom Feelings's *The Middle Passage*. Published in 1995, it is a wordless book illustrated with black-and-white paintings. It portrays the same horrors of slave ships, brutal whippings, auction blocks, and families torn asunder.

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