

Louis Short Guide

Louis by Julius Lester

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Overview

Louis is a slave who at the beginning of the story lives about a day's walk from the Ohio border. Having learned that his master plans to sell him, Louis makes a spur-of-the-moment decision to flee north to the big river on the other side of which, his mother told him, is freedom. The story is more than an account of a slave's escape; it tells of what help a fleeing slave could expect, of what dangers an escaped slave might encounter, and of what slaves did once they made their way into Ohio. The story of Louis, in Lester's view, also illustrates a cause of the Civil War: slaves were eventually escaping through the Underground Railroad at such a furious rate that the institution of slavery was threatened with extinction, and the Southern slave states began a war in an effort to stop the northward exodus of slaves to freedom.

About the Author

Julius Lester is a best-selling author of books for young people, as well as an author for young adults. He was born in St. Louis on January 27, 1939, and he grew up amidst the African- American traditions that form the basis for much of his work. He wrote *To Be a Slave*, his first book for young adults, at the suggestion of an editor. This nonfiction work describes the lives of American slaves and, in so doing, attempts to fill prominent gaps in American history as taught in standard curriculums. The book became a best-seller, attracted a worldwide audience, and was a 1969 Newbery Honor Book. Much of Lester's subsequent writing for young adults has focused on African-American folktales, but the stories of *Long Journey Home* are inspired by factual accounts of the African-American experience. *Long Journey Home*, from which "Louis" is taken, won the 1972 Lewis Carroll Shelf Award and was a finalist for the National Book Award.

Setting

"Louis" takes place before the Civil War in an area south of the Mississippi River and the free state of Ohio. The locations of the action are typical of the era the story takes place in—beginning with the slave quarters, a dash through woodlands, and a desperate paddling against the powerful current of the Mississippi. The other settings focus on the people who helped escaped slaves: a farm owned by escaped slaves, a house with a hidden room in which runaway slaves hid while slave owners and the law searched for them, and even a couple of grocery stores, where Louis quickly learns a trade. Each setting is remarkable for the vivid and spare descriptions that give a palpable sense of authenticity.

Social Sensitivity

"Louis" is about one of the most sensitive of all of America's social issues—the institution of slavery that kept millions of people in bondage.

The short story focuses on a specific aspect of the issue of slavery, the attempts by slaves to flee their bondage.

By sticking to the basic facts of a real-life case, Lester offers a view of what an escaped slave's experiences were like. There is little that is sensational about Louis's experiences; he is a fairly ordinary young man dealing with fairly ordinary people. It is probably this very ordinariness that makes the story compelling reading since the events depicted were commonplaces.

The fear, the brutality, the desire for freedom, the yearning for knowledge, and the pride in earning one's way in the world were almost universal emotions for slaves and runaway slaves.

Literary Qualities

Basing a story on real characters and events requires the author to thoroughly research his subject, and in turn provides him with historical material that can give his story intensity and realism and educate readers as they make their way through the narrative. Louis's escape by just slowly slipping back into a sympathetic audience in a courtroom would seem contrived and unlikely if it were not based on something that actually happened.

A highly dramatic incident like this forcefully presents an historical event.

A potential drawback to basing a story on real people is that it imposes ethical limitations on the author; the characters the author develops should be true to the people on whom they are based. This is often a tough challenge since real people tend to be a mixture of good and bad traits, and heroes and villains can be very hard to identify. In "Louis," Lester seems to handle the limitations well; his inventions are a coherent plot development and a fleshing-out of Louis's personality.

A plot requires conflict and conflict, unless it is internal, requires an antagonist, and here Master Jenkins is the antagonist. The slave-owner first plans to sell Louis, a frightening prospect for a young slave, and then later pursues the fled-to-freedom Louis through Ohio, threatening Louis's hard-won liberty. This confrontation between master and chattel, between the hunter and the hunted, is charged with greater moral force and dramatic immediacy by the underlying symbolism of the two men. Louis and Master Jenkins symbolize the quest for and dangers of supremacy. Master Jenkins becomes more than a single human antagonist: he represents the many slave owners who pursued escaped slaves into free states intent on bringing them back to slavery. Master Jenkins embodies the concept of slavery itself—that dark, lurking, and ubiquitous foe of freedom ready to take Louis's life from him. The law itself is the other powerful abstract antagonist that Lester incarnates in narrating Louis's growth towards mental, spiritual, and physical liberation. The law for Louis is a menace to liberty, but it is also a potential, though painfully inadequate, preserver of liberty. The law says that escaped slaves must be returned to their former masters; through its agents the marshal, the court, and the judge the law tries to send Louis back into slavery. The law, though, is not the stygian prospect that slavery is because the law has provisions that, if properly followed, are meant to protect people. Louis is entitled by law to a court hearing, and it is this legal right that saves him from being immediately sent south, thus giving him another opportunity to preserve his freedom. Louis is no longer the frightened and ignorant teenager of the story's beginning.

Through learning to think for himself he has become a man of confident decisiveness with a far greater knowledge of the world. Once in the court, Louis knows that he should not trust the law to save him from slavery, and he makes good his escape before the court rules on his case.

Themes and Characters

Louis is both the human focus of the story and a symbolic figure who represents the thousands of slaves who tried to flee northward toward freedom. Much about Louis and his circumstances are intentionally made typical of his era in order to intensify this symbolic identification. He is surprised to find the big river close to where he had been a slave; slaves were often kept ignorant of their geographic locations because not knowing where they were helped prevent conspiracies among slaves of different owners—even if the slaves escaped they would not know how to find each other. This geographical ignorance further impeded slaves who tried to escape since they stood a very good chance of moving deeper into slave territory rather than closer to the edge of it. Without knowing which direction to flee in, which roads to take, and which rivers to cross an attempted escape without assistance became a fearsome enterprise. Louis imagines the journey from where he lives as a slave to the river to be a long and dangerous one because he remembers his mother saying that freedom was to the north across a big river. He is surprised to find it after about a day of running and wishes his fellow slaves knew how close it was—implying that many others would run away if they thought they had a good chance of escaping to the free states.

Once across the Mississippi River into Ohio, Louis meets various characters who represent typical figures involved in the underground railroad, the first of them being the Millers, two escaped slaves who own a farm just north of the Mississippi. Many escaped slaves became farmers in Midwestern states, laying the economic foundation for subsequent generations of African-Americans in the central and western United States of the late nineteenth century. The Millers explain to Louis his situation and what could happen to him if he does not go to Canada. Louis stubbornly wants to remain in Ohio.

Louis, after dressing as a woman to disguise himself and being spirited away by the Underground Railroad, finds himself in the care of a minister whose house features a common element of the Underground Railroad, a room so skillfully hidden that even slaves who have hidden in it cannot find it once outside. A grocery store owner who is sympathetic to escaped slaves and who asks no questions when they leave gives Louis a job.

Louis now begins to taste some of the benefits of freedom—through hard work he learns the grocery business and earns money for himself, not a master. The freedom to choose for himself is so valuable to Louis that it motivates his actions for the rest of the story, including his insistence on choosing to live in Ohio even after he knows that his former master is searching for him.

As his character develops, Louis becomes ambitious and more aware of the complexity of the world of the free. He is much impressed by blacks who speak well and eloquently at antislavery meetings, and he wishes to learn to speak as well as they and to become as knowledgeable. His learning to read is a part of this new ambition. He is surprised to discover that there are white people who speak as impassioned as the black people

against slavery; the antislavery opponents turn out to be a vast movement of which most slaves, as represented by Louis, are unaware.

Slaves who escaped to a free state were never fully free of fear—the law said that they could be sent back to their slave masters in the slave states.

Louis, in an experience common to many runaway slaves, is pursued by his owner; the first time his owner gets close to him, Louis manages to escape farther north, but the next time Louis is ambushed and carried off.

The marshal who helps capture him is a troubling figure. He says he has no desire to send Louis back into slavery but that he must do so because the law requires it. Yet, he tries to evade the legal requirement that Louis be given a court hearing before being returned to his master. This means that the marshal is at best a hypocrite; on the other hand, law officers really did often ignore the law and just send the escaped slaves—and perhaps some freemen too—straight back into slavery, as fast as they could.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why would Louis be afraid of being sold?
2. Why would Louis's owner want to keep him illiterate and ignorant of the world ?
3. Why would the marshal lie to Louis?
4. Why would the grocers be willing to hire an escaped slave?
5. Louis becomes more knowledgeable and self-confident as the story progresses. What is the most important step in his development?
6. What aspects of freedom does Louis most cherish?
7. Why are the Millers, both escaped slaves, living just across the river from a slave state?
8. The Underground Railroad seems to be a large social network involving not only people who help escaped slaves evade pursuit but others like the grocers who offer the escaped slaves employment. Why is this broad social network important?
9. Could Louis have escaped without the help of others? Does his accepting help from others mean that he is a weak person?
10. What more about Louis would you like to know beyond what Lester tells us?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The Underground Railroad was a remarkable social phenomenon that involved the partnership and trust of thousands of people of different religious beliefs, social standing, and political philosophy. How did the Underground Railroad work? Was it successful enough to threaten the existence of slavery in the United States?

2. Lester says that "Louis" was inspired by Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, an important figure in the running of the Underground Railroad. Find a copy of this book and report on the incidents that Lester uses for his story.

Who was Levi Coffin?

3. What was the law passed in 1850 that required law officers to return escaped slaves to their masters, even when the escaped slaves were living in states in which slavery was illegal?

Who wrote the law? Who favored the law? Who tried to prevent its passing?

4. How were escaped slaves treated in Ohio during the decade and a half before the Civil War? What did the escaped slaves do to survive?

5. Louis is surprised that the girl who is teaching him to read after his escape was herself illiterate only a year or so before. How extensive was the educational system for escaped slaves? Who was in charge of the instruction? Why was it important?

6. Louis mentions antislavery meetings. Who organized such meetings?

What was their purpose? Who attended them?

7. When the marshal says he is only taking Louis back to his master because it is the law, he lies, because he breaks the law by trying to force Louis back to his master without the court hearing required by law. Who in the free states, and Ohio in particular, wanted escaped slaves sent back into slavery? What did they do to capture and return slaves?

8. Bounty hunters (or slave gangs) would travel through free states capturing escaped slaves for the reward they would receive when these seized former slaves were returned to slave states. These bounty hunters often captured legally free blacks and sent them into slavery. Why was this illegal kidnapping not stopped?

9. Where in the United States could African-Americans be safe from slavers? Was Canada their only hope for a secure freedom?

10. Louis eventually goes to Canada.

What awaited him there in his day?

How would he have been treated?

What happened to the escaped slaves and their descendants in Canada?

How does their treatment compare with the treatment of escaped slaves and their descendants in the United States?

For Further Reference

Coffin, Levi. *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, the Reputed President of the Underground Railroad*. New York: AMS Press, 1971 (circa 1876). This book includes many accounts of escaping slaves, including the one that inspired Lester to write "Louis."

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

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

Related Titles

"Louis" is representative of Lester's lifelong interest in African-American history. He resolved in the late 1960s to write about some of the history young adults might be missing in their schooling and everyday reading; this first resulted in *To Be a Slave* (1968; see separate entry, Vol. 3), an account of day-to-day slavery that has since lost none of its pertinence for young adult readers. In *Long Journey Home* (1972), Lester presents several short stories that encompass the entire gamut of African-American experience from slavery to segregation. *Long Journey Home* is one of the most distinguished collections of short stories for young adults ever published, and "Louis" is one of them.

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Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

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