

# The Conflict Center's Book Talk Guide FOR CAREGIVERS!

## BOOK BASICS

Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad

Ellen Levine (Author) and Kadir Nelson (Illustrator)

Scholastic Press, 2007

Grades 3-5



## ABOUT THE BOOK

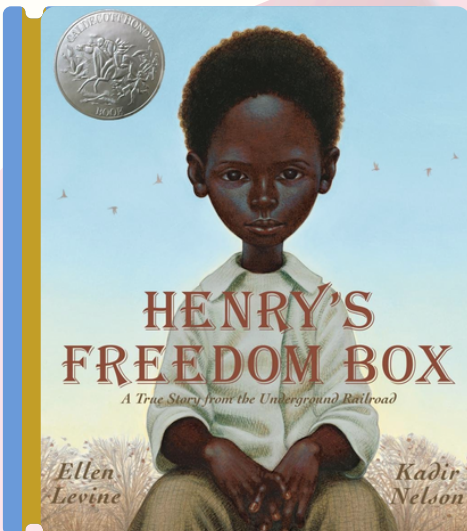
Henry Brown doesn't know how old he is. Henry is enslaved and constantly dreams about freedom. He grows up and marries, but he is again devastated when his family is sold at the slave market. Then one day, as he lifts a crate at the warehouse, he knows exactly what he must do: He will mail himself to the North. After an arduous journey in the crate, Henry finally has a birthday—his first day of freedom.

## WHAT THE BOOK TEACHES: THE BIG IDEAS

- Freedom means having the power to make decisions about your own life. Freedom is a right that all people deserve.
- Henry “Box” Brown, with his intelligence, persistence and determination, worked hard to get the freedom that he deserved. He had allies who helped.
- Slavery is wrong, cruel and unjust. It hurts people, tears children from their parents and separates enslaved people from their loved ones.

## WHAT ARE “MIRROR AND WINDOW” BOOKS?

Children's books are often referred to as “mirrors and windows.” Coined by Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop in 1990, “mirrors” refer to books where children can see themselves in the characters and stories; those mirrors reflect various aspects of their identity. “Window” books help children look “outside,” to learn about other people, identities and experiences of those who are different from them, helping children learn more about the world outside themselves. Reading for Peace understands the importance of mirrors and windows when selecting books to read with children.



## QUESTIONS TO SPARK CONVERSATION

- (Pre-reading) Let's look at the cover together. What do you think the book will be about?
- What is Henry like? What are his experiences as an enslaved person?
- How does Henry feel when he's separated from his family? How do you know?
- What happens when Henry gets married and has his own family? How does he feel when they are also separated and he never sees them again?
- Why do you think the birds make Henry think about being free?
- What did you learn about slavery and the Underground Railroad?
- How did you feel when the book ended?

## NUGGETS FOR LEARNING



**Understand:** Learn more about enslavement. Elicit and explain that slavery is a system of injustice where individuals are treated as property and forced to work against their will. People who are enslaved do not get paid, often work under harsh and dangerous conditions and are not free to live as they please. Enslavement in the U.S. took place from 1619-1865. African people were taken from their homes without their permission, brought to the U.S. and were enslaved. To learn more about enslavement together, read books suggested below or others, conduct research, go to a Black history museum (if there's one nearby, or online) special exhibits, watch videos, etc.



**Explore:** Symbols of freedom. Explain that sometimes in books, an object, image, animal, or character is used to show or represent something else, called a symbol. Ask if they remember the two times in the book that birds appear and what Henry thinks about them. Elicit/explain that the birds are symbols of freedom. Ask: What is freedom? Elicit/explain that freedom is being able to make choices and decisions about your own life, like where to live, what to do, what to say, and who to spend time with, without being owned or controlled by someone else. Share that Henry and his family were not free when they were enslaved. Ask about other symbols of freedom (e.g., Statue of Liberty, broken chains, handcuffs breaking, etc.). You can then draw together some of these symbols and talk more about what freedom means to them.



**Create:** Focus on feelings. Re-read the book a second time and this time, every few pages, ask how Henry and the other characters are feeling. You can ask "How do you think Henry is feeling now?" and "How do you know?" getting them to think about how they can tell how others feel. You can also ask how they feel during different parts of the book (e.g., when Henry is separated from his family, when Henry worked at the factory, when Henry met Nancy, when Henry's children and wife disappeared, when Henry traveled and then arrived in a box to Philadelphia) and share your own feelings, which helps to build empathy. Together, make a feelings collage using words, drawings, emojis, cut-outs from magazines/catalogs that illustrate feelings.





## ABOUT READING FOR PEACE

Reading for Peace is a volunteer-led program that brings small-group storytime to elementary schools across the Denver metro area. Each week, volunteers read and discuss books with students that are thoughtfully chosen to support social-emotional learning and build connection. The experience is deeply meaningful for both children and volunteers alike.

## WHAT'S ON OUR SHELF? SIMILAR TITLES:

