

The Conflict Center's Book Talk Guide FOR TEACHERS!

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

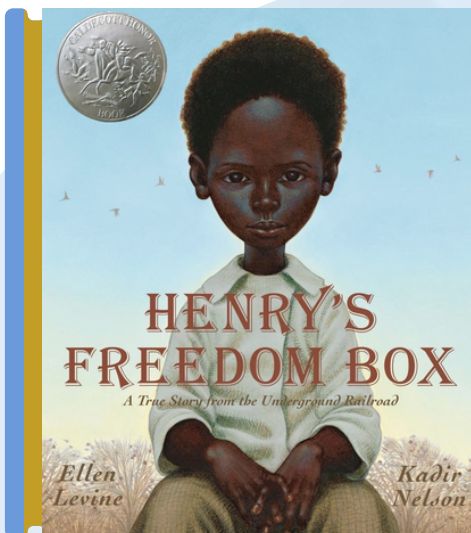
Henry Brown doesn't know how old he is. Henry is enslaved and constantly dreams about freedom. He grows up and marries, but he is again devastated when his family is sold at the slave market. Then one day, as he lifts a crate at the warehouse, he knows exactly what he must do: He will mail himself to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



SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- (Pre-reading) Look at the cover of the book. What do you think it will be about? What can you tell about the person on the cover of the book?
- Who is Henry and what is his life like as an enslaved person?
- When Henry sees the bird flying free, how does it make him feel and why?
- How does Henry feel when he meets Nancy, gets married and has a family?
- How does Henry feel when his family is torn apart? How do you know how he feels?
- How did Henry become free? How did other people help? Do you think Henry could have made it to Philadelphia on his own? Why or why not?
- How do you think Henry felt as he traveled in the box to Philadelphia?
- What do you think happens after Henry arrives in Philadelphia and becomes a free man?
- While reading the book, what did you learn about slavery and the Underground Railroad?
- What thoughts came to mind while you were reading or listening to the book?
- How did you feel while reading or listening to the book?
- Why do you think the author wrote this book? What's the big idea in the book?

WAYS TO EXTEND THE BOOK

- **Continue the story.** Ask students: How does the story end? What happens when Henry arrives in Philadelphia? What do you think will happen next for Henry as a free man? Invite students to imagine what might happen next for Henry, after he is free and living in Philadelphia. Have students then continue the story by either writing a few more pages of the book (including dialogue), drawing illustrations or both. Share with the class.
- **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. The “Underground Railroad” was not a real railroad. It took place during slavery and was a group of people, secret routes and safe houses used by enslaved Black people to escape to Northern free states and Canada. Use the suggested books below and other classroom and library resources to learn more.
- **Explore what freedom means.** Ask students: 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. Then ask: What did freedom mean to Henry and other enslaved people? What does freedom mean to you? Engage students in writing a poem or essay about what freedom means to them, either related to slavery or to their own lives. They can create an acrostic poem (a poem where the first letter of each line spells out a word, name, or phrase when read vertically), using the word FREEDOM, or do a free verse or other type of poem. Share with the class.

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:

