Teaching Young Children About Slavery Using Literature

by Judith Y. Singer

One goal of social studies education is to help children learn to care about how people are treated in the world, whether we are talking about the enslavement of Africans in the Americas, the systematic removal of Native Americans to barren lands in the western part of the United States, the devastating repercussions of the Great Famine in Ireland, the calculated extermination of Jews in Nazi Europe, or the neglect of homeless people living on the sidewalks of New York City.

Slavery is a painful and frightening part of our history as Americans, a part which many elementary school teachers would rather not discuss. But our silences about slavery are potentially more damaging to the well-being of our children than the pain associated with learning about slavery. The silences hide from Black children who they are and prevent all children from thinking about what kind of people they want to be.

Children of all backgrounds need to feel empowered when they are faced with the fearful events of slavery, and I believe that stories about resistance to slavery and the hope of freedom are critical to giving them that sense of power. Children also have to learn about the pain of slavery, however, or they won't be able understand why people struggled as they did to become free.

The books described below, all picture books, are suitable for elementary school students of varying ages. They were selected because of the different ways they help us think about hope and struggle, as well as their extraordinary illustrations. Most of the books can be read to children in grades kindergarten through second grade with appropriate discussion and interpretation from their teachers.

In the Time of the Drums by Kim L. Siegelson (1999), illustrated by Brian Pinkney. New York: Hyperion.

"In the long ago time before now. . . men and women and their children lived enslaved." So begins the story of Twi, an Ibo conjure woman enslaved in the Georgia South Sea Islands and a little boy, Mentu, whom she is raising to be "strong-strong." Twi teaches Mentu to play the drums and to sing the songs of Africa, and she tells him that unless he is strong, his memories of who he is will slip away. She admonishes Mentu, "Takes a mighty strength not to forget who you are. Where you come from. To help others remember it, too."

This story helps children see that the Africans brought to the U. S. to work as slaves were people with rich cultures and significant skills. It is one of many stories about a magical escape from slavery, using supernatural powers begotten in Africa. Twi escapes with a newly arrived boatload of Ibo people, who reputedly walk beneath the water back to their homes across the sea. Mentu remains on the island, helping others become "strong-strong" by passing down the songs, stories and music of Africa.

Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt by Deborah Hopkinson (1993), illustrated by James Ransome. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Dragonfly Books.

This story provides the reader with some windows into the daily life of a slave. It begins by portraying the sorrow Sweet Clara feels when she is sent away from her mother to work in the fields. "When I got there, I cried so much they thought I was never gon' eat or drink again. I didn't want to leave my mother." As she adapts to her new home, we see Clara picking cotton in the fields with Young Jack. Then Aunt Rachel teaches her how to sew so that she can become a seamstress and work in the Big House. Children can see in this book that slaves did different kinds of work, some of which was highly skilled. Clara applies her skills as a seamstress to sewing a map which she believes will lead her and Young Jack to freedom.

The quilt map may actually help Clara and Young Jack find freedom, or it may help them dream of freedom. Either way, the quilt is a symbol of hope. At the end of the book, the dream continues as Clara tells us, "Sometimes I wish I could sew a quilt that would spread over the whole land, and the people just follow the stitches to freedom, as easy as taking a Sunday walk."

A Place Called Freedom by Scott Russell Sanders (1997), illustrated by Thomas B. Allen. New York: Aladdin.

This is the story of a town in Canada created by freed Blacks and runaway slaves in the mid-1800's. A freed slave named Starman from Tennessee brings his family to Canada where he begins to farm with supplies and help

from a Quaker family. The farm grows into a town as Starman makes trips back and forth to Tennessee to bring back family and friends who were left behind. The narrator describes the skills that former slaves brought with them. “Papa could grow anything, and he could handle horses, and he could build a barn or a bed.” Mama “could sew clothes that fit you like the wind.” Others who came to the town were “carpenters and blacksmiths, basket weavers and barrel makers.” When the railroad runs tracks through the town, the townspeople have to give it a name. They decide to call the it Freedom, as a reminder to all that they have left slavery behind them.

The Wagon by Tony Johnston (1996), illustrated by James E. Ransome. New York: Mulberry Paperback.

“Like all my family, birth to grave, my skin made me a slave.” Black people did not suffer slavery easily. This book conveys the deep anger a young boy feels at being a slave. Part of the appeal of the book is that the boy continuously expresses his anger. Even while he helps his father build a beautiful wagon, he yearns to be free to go where he pleases. When he hears stories of battles, he hacks at the wagon with an ax in his frustration at not being able to join the Union army. “I got striped good for that” he tells us.

“Then everything changed. The President wrote some words one day. We had gone to bed slaves. But we woke up free.” The boy’s father asks Master for the wagon he and his son built. As the family rides away from the plantation in the wagon, they learn that President Lincoln has been shot. At the end of the story, as their first free act, the boy and his family take the wagon to Washington to say good-bye to Mr. Lincoln.

The Red Comb by Fernando Picó (1991), illustrated by María Antonia Ordóñez. New York: Troll Medallion.

This story takes place in Puerto Rico in the mid-eighteenth century, when slavery was legal but there were also towns of former slaves who had escaped from neighboring islands. The story tells of two women who use their wits to help a runaway slave escape from a slave-catcher. The villagers, eager to earn eight pesos for helping to capture the runaway, are taken to task by Rosa Bultrón, who asks if they have “forgotten that our grandparents came to this island on a tiny, water-logged boat after fleeing from an Englishman’s plantation in Antigua?” This story has an important message for children about caring for others and taking responsibility for one another.

Follow the Drinking Gourd by J. Winter (1988). New York: Alfred A. Knopf. *Harriet and the Promised Land* by Jacob Lawrence (1993). New York: Aladdin. *Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky* by Faith Ringgold (1992). New York: Crown.

The most persistent theme in children’s stories about slavery is escaping to freedom. Each of these three books is about escaping on the Underground Railroad. The first features a conductor named Peg Leg Joe who teaches slaves a song, “Follow the Drinking Gourd,” which helps them follow the North Star to freedom. The book provides the readers with words and music to this song so they can learn to sing it. *Harriet and the Promised Land* is illustrated by Jacob Lawrence, a renowned African American artist. The book is an introduction to his work as well as to Harriet Tubman, a famous conductor on the Underground Railroad. The third version of this story takes the protagonists, Cassie and her little brother Be Be on a magical journey into the past to learn about the bravery of conductors and passengers on the Underground Railroad. Children can benefit from reading all three of these stories and discussing their similarities and differences.

Other books to consider: *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* by Julius Lester (1998), illustrated by Rod Brown. N.Y.: Puffin. *Freedom Child of the Sea* by Richardo Keens-Douglas (1995), illustrated by Julia Gukova. Toronto: Annick. *Freedom River* by Doreen Rappaport (2000), illustrated by Bryan Collier. N.Y: Hyperion.

Margaret Goff Clark (1991). *Freedom Crossing*. New York: Scholastic.

Reviewed by Rachel Thompson

I teach in an urban middle school with students from a predominantly white, working class neighborhood that has had a recent influx of immigrants from Europe, Central and South America. Because issues of racial and ethnic prejudice and injustice remain current and sensitive in our community, teaching about slavery and the United States Civil War is one of the more difficult units for me to present in my classes.

I introduce the topic of slavery by asking students to discuss what they already know. Invariably, they think know a great deal about slavery, however, most of their knowledge is not accurate. I find that textbooks, which are usually dry and fact-laden, are little help in getting them to reconsider what they think and that most primary source documents are too difficult and long to read in class on a regular basis. On the other hand, historical fiction provides a means to examine historical events from multiple perspectives while piquing their curiosity and enthusiasm. One of the best books for this purpose is *Freedom Crossing* by Margaret Goff Clark.

Freedom Crossing is the story of young white girl named Laura who returns to her family's farm in western New York State after living with an aunt and uncle in Virginia. She discovers that her brother and a childhood friend are now conductors on the Underground Railroad and the farm is a station on the route to Canada. She must decide whether she is willing to violate fugitive slave laws and help a 12 year-old boy named Martin Paige escape to freedom. Based on their reading of this book, my students learn, on a very personal level they can identify with, how Blacks struggled to survive during slavery. They also learn how ordinary people like themselves can take responsibility for events going on around them and contribute to creating a more just world.

Students enjoy comparing the story in *Freedom Crossing* with events described by historical documents. The book reports one escape route for runaway slaves, so we compare the book's account with information and maps on the Underground Railroad. Why were some routes better than others? How did slaves find their way along these routes? What were their journeys like? How were they helped or hindered along the way? How did slaves send messages about routes? As an activity, we create our own Underground Railroad "maps."

In chapter six of *Freedom Crossing*, the author describes Martin's former master making him forget how to read. I use this as a starting point to explore laws about the education of slaves and living conditions under slavery. One topic students love to debate is the similarities and differences between Martin's attitude toward education and the attitudes of young people today.

One of the more powerful moments in the book is when Laura sees Martin's back, scarred from whippings. We use this scene to discuss how enslaved people were treated, what it meant to be a slave, and why people were so determined to runaway and secure freedom.

We finish the unit by discussing what students would have done if they were Laura and why. We also look at the way that life and attitudes about race have changed since the Civil War, what still needs to be changed, and how individuals can be involved in changing it. These discussions lead to an examination of child labor in the world today and what must be done to stop it.

Slavery and Reconstruction in Literature for Middle and High School Students

by Sally Smith

The textbook treatment of the institution of slavery and its practice in the United States can provide a useful historical framework and a brief glimpse of the lives of slaves and Abolitionists. But due to coverage constraints, textbooks often exclude the previous history of enslaved people, stories of free Blacks living in the North, and stories of everyday resistance to bondage, as well as an examination of cultures that arose in slave quarters blending African and European customs and beliefs. Novels, memoirs and autobiographies can offer students access to these missing perspectives, while involving them in the emotional impact of these experiences. Historian Howard Zinn recommends their use to help students understand what it was like to be a slave, to be jammed into slave ships, and to be separated from your family. He wants students to "learn the words of people themselves, to feel their anger, their indignation."

This review of literature for use in the study of the institution of slavery and its historical contexts in the United States focuses on the work of two African American authors whose books explore the socio-political, cultural and personal contexts of slavery and its aftermath. Joyce Hansen, an author of realistic fiction as well as historical and nonfiction books, has written widely on this period. Her books range from the carefully researched, fictionalized story of a West African boy kidnapped and sold into slavery in *The Captive*, to *Between Two Fires: Black Soldiers in the Civil War* and *Bury Me Not in a Land of Slaves*, nonfiction works that address the Civil War and Reconstruction. Her work has received popular and critical acclaim including recognition as a notable book from the National Council for the Social Studies and Parents' Choice and Coretta Scott King Honor Book Awards. While working in New York City middle schools, I had the opportunity to see enthusiastic and thoughtful responses to her historical fiction.

Virginia Hamilton has written widely in several genres for young adults, from mysteries with historical themes such as *The House of Dies Drear*, to contemporary fiction like *Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush*, and a fictional biography, *Anthony Burns: The Defeat and Triumph of a Runaway Slave*. She has also collected, edited and introduced an anthology of folk tales, *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*.

Hamilton, like Hansen, is an African American author writing about Black history. Both authors emphasize the importance of the their personal perspectives as they research and write about African American history. Hansen, speaking to students at several New York City schools, stated that she believed her own experience as an African American and a descendent of slave enabled her to look at and interpret primary source and secondary source data in a way that accentuates the meaning of a text. Hamilton, comparing her work to those of white writers, especially well-known Abolitionists, wrote, "I wanted readers to have a book in which the oppressed slave. . . was at the center of his own struggle." In *Anthony Burns*, she gives readers that story.

As in other aspects of history, it is important to look beyond famous and familiar names and events to obtain an in depth understanding of a period and of the experiences of a people. This adds to the importance of including such books in the social studies curriculum.

Books by Joyce Hansen

The Captive (1994). New York: Apple Books. Hansen used an early slave narrative to construct a fast paced novel about Kofi, an Ashanti chieftain's son, sold into slavery and shipped to Massachusetts just after the Revolutionary War. Incorporating historical persons such as the Colonist Paul Cuffe, a Black ship owner, she tells the story of Kofi's enslavement and eventual freedom, through the intervention of Cuffe and other free Blacks. The carefully researched story provides a vivid picture of post-colonial Massachusetts and the active community of free Blacks in Boston and other New England cities. Kofi is an engaging protagonist and his personal story and the historical context are skillfully interwoven. Recommended for grades 6-8.

Which Way Freedom (1986). New York: Camelot. Based on actual events including accounts of the First South Carolina Volunteers and the Massacre at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, this novel narrates the story of Obi, a young slave who's life-long plan to escape and find his mother are realized as the Civil War begins. About to be sold during the upheaval at the first sign of war, he volunteers to serve in the Confederate Army until he is able to slip away to join the Union forces. The opening chapters picture daily life in slave quarters. A helpful and moving historical framework is provided by the quotations from primary sources that begin each chapter. Grades 6-8.

Out From This Place (1994). New York: Camelot. This novel continues the story begun in *Which Way Freedom*. It is told from the point of view of Easter, a young woman who was Obi's close friend. Set in the turbulent period of Reconstruction just after the end of the War, the story is based on events in South Carolina, the Sea Islands, and the coast of Florida. Easter finds herself working for wages for the government on an abandoned plantation. Determined to find Obi and others from her slave-times "family," she joins those wandering the roads looking for their kin. She eventually locates Obi and they help found New Canaan, an all-Black community based on an actual all-Black community that developed after the war. Recommended for grades 6-8.

Bury Me Not in the Land of Slaves: African Americans in the Time of Reconstruction (2000). New York: Franklin Watts. While the focus of this text is the period of Reconstruction, it provides a thorough and accessible background to first African slaves to in the colonies and the development of the institution of slavery in the North and the South. This history is enhanced by the inclusion of primary documents such as political cartoons from the period, slave narratives, maps, excerpts from government documents, photographs and illustrations from period newspapers and journals. The text also includes brief biographies of African Americans whose lives and or writings were critical to the period, such as Frederick Douglass, Martin Delaney, and Charlotte Forten. Recommended for grades 9-12 and adults.

Books by Virginia Hamilton

The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales (2000). New York: Random House. All ages. Twenty-four stories organized according to theme and type, including "Tales from Bruh Rabbit"; "Tales from the Real, Extravagant, and Fanciful"; "Tales of the Supernatural"; and "The Running Ways and Other Slave Tales of Freedom." This beautifully illustrated collection is a winner of the Coretta Scott King Award. Hamilton uses the stories to examine the strength of the human spirit under oppression and the role of story in that setting. Stories from "The Running Ways" are of particular importance to the study of slavery in the South. The Bruh Rabbit tales echo the African Trickster Tales of the slaves' ancestors, brought to the new world and modified to fit new circumstances. Also available on audio tape. Recommended for grades 4-12.

Anthony Burns: The Defeat and Triumph of a Fugitive Slave (1988). New York: Knopf. Hamilton's fictional biography of Burns, based on historical documents and accounts from the period. It provides a vivid picture of the impact of the Fugitive Slave Act on people who escaped to the North and tried to begin productive, normal lives. The text alternates between Burns' imagined memories of his life as a slave in South Carolina and his trial in Boston where he is charged with being a fugitive. The chapters detailing his experiences as a slave are poignant and harsh. The author includes selections from the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and a bibliography. This text is an important contribution to understanding the range of experiences of slaves working on and off the farms and plantations of the South and the dangers they faced even when free in the North. Recommended for grades 7-9.

Suggested Activities for Students

1. In *Bury Me Not in a Land of Slaves*, Hansen describes the formation of the Confederacy when Lincoln became President in 1860. Imagine you are a foreign visitor to the United States. Using your knowledge of slavery and the plantation system, write: a) a detailed letter to a friend describing what life looks like in the North and the South; b) an article for your hometown paper describing the similarities and differences between Americans living in the Union and in the Confederacy.
2. Like most enslaved Africans, Obi and Easter were illiterate while living on the plantation. Imagine that Obi and Easter could read and write. Take on the voice of either Easter or Obi and write a journal of your experiences during one week of the time period discussed in one of the two books.
3. Using a web search and library and media resources, prepare a presentation for your classmates on one of the following historical topics. Your presentation should include visual aids. a) The First South Carolina Volunteers (Union Army) and the Twenty-fifth Corps (*Which Way Freedom*); b) New Canaan, a town based on an all-Black community formed in South Carolina just after the Civil War (*Out From This Place*).
4. Abolitionists had to decide whether to forcefully resist efforts to arrest escaped slaves liked Arthur Burns. Write a letter to the editor of a local newspaper explaining your views on violating the Fugitive Slave Laws.