



Classroom Guide for
UP THE LEARNING TREE
by **Marcia Vaughan**
illustrated by **Derek Blanks**

Reading Level

*Reading Level: Grades 2–3

Interest Level: Grades 1–4

Guided Reading Level: M

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 3.4/.5

*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

Themes

Learning, Self-Esteem, Diversity, African/African American Interest, Historical Interest, Slavery and Freedom

Synopsis

Up The Learning Tree takes place in the South prior to the Civil War. Henry Bell, an enslaved child, is not allowed to attend school or be educated in any way. However, when he is asked to walk the Master's son to and from school everyday, he has an opportunity to see what school is all about. Hidden high in a sycamore tree, Henry can see and hear the lessons within the schoolhouse. One day Henry's desire to learn overcomes him. He takes a badly-worn book from the trash and is caught by the teacher, Miss Hattie. She immediately sees Henry's determination to learn to read. So instead of punishing him, Miss Hattie begins to help Henry with the lessons after school because she does not believe slavery is right, even though Henry's master does not allow his slaves to be educated. In the end Miss Hattie is found out and must leave town, but Henry keeps on learning. He is hopeful that the power of education will one day lead him to freedom.

BACKGROUND

The idea for *Up The Learning Tree* came to Marcia Vaughan after reading many narratives about the severe punishments that enslaved people faced if they were caught with materials for reading or writing. The fear of revolts or forged passes caused Southern slaveholders to oppose the education of slaves. In some states there were laws enacted that officially forbade teaching those who were enslaved to read or write. Still, many slaves were resourceful in finding ways to learn. They often learned from one another and passed education down from parents to children.

Teaching Tip

Up The Learning Tree would be useful as part of a unit on the importance of education and as a story to feature as part of your observance of Black History Month in February.

BEFORE READING**Prereading Focus Questions**

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

1. What does it mean to be educated? Why is education important? What are some ways to become educated?
2. Is it easy or hard to get an education in the United States? What about in other countries?
3. What is historical fiction? Have we read any historical fiction stories? How can you tell if a book is historical fiction?
4. What do you know about the history of slavery in the United States?
5. What is the difference between a right and a privilege? Do you think learning to read and write, and going to school, is a right or a privilege? Why do you think so?

Exploring the Book

Read and talk about the title of the book. Ask students what they think the title means. What do you think the story is about?

Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: front and back covers, title page, dedications, illustrations, and Author's Note including quotes.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Have students read to find out about the ways enslaved people were treated as property and the risks Henry Bell took on his path to educating himself.

VOCABULARY

The story contains several words and colloquialisms commonly used in the southern United States in the mid-1800s. Have students work with these words and phrases, which may be unfamiliar to them. Talk about the vocabulary below, and then ask students to find a synonym for each word or phrase that is more like the words we use today.

lickey-split
suddenlike
book learning
schoolhouse
dull minded

scoot
bursting his britches
mercy me
spankin' new
no-account troublemaker

AFTER READING**Discussion Questions**

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and illustrations in the book to support their responses.

1. Why wasn't Henry allowed to go to school?
2. What gave Henry the idea that he wanted to learn to read?
3. What are some ways Henry learned the lessons that were taught every day in the schoolhouse?
4. What happened when Miss Hattie saw Henry take the book from the trash?
5. Why didn't Miss Hattie tell on Henry? Why did she begin helping him learn? What impressed her about Henry?
6. How did Miss Hattie get caught teaching Henry? Who came to the school and what did they say?
7. Why did Miss Hattie have to leave?
8. Do you think Miss Hattie was mad at Henry when she had to leave the school? Why or why not?
9. What did Henry give Miss Hattie when she was packing her things? Why was this a special present?
10. Do you think Henry liked to learn? Why or why not?
11. Why does Henry think it is important to learn to read and write?
12. What did Henry do in order to gain the opportunity to learn to read and write?
13. How was Miss Hattie different from the other adults in the story? How did she treat Henry differently than the Mistress?
14. Do you think the risks Henry took to learn were worth it? Why or why not?

Literature Circles

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing on the different roles of the group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to the ones in the Discussion Question section of this guide.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for lines in the story that suggest how each character is feeling.
- The **Illustrator** might create scenes on a timeline that follow the plot.

- The **Connector** might find information about other ways slaves found to educate themselves.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of each character in the book and describe the kind of person he or she was.
- The **Investigator** might look for information about education for African Americans after slavery was abolished.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: GETTING STARTED WITH LITERATURE CIRCLES by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), LITERATURE CIRCLES: VOICE AND CHOICE IN BOOK CLUBS AND READING GROUPS by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and LITERATURE CIRCLES RESOURCE GUIDE by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

Reader's Response

Use the following questions or similar ones to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, essays, or oral discussion.

1. What characteristics helped Henry succeed in learning to read and write? What things in his environment held him back?
2. What are the most positive parts of the story? What are the least positive? Why do you think so?
3. How do students in your school show their determination to learn in and out of school? Do they have to make sacrifices to make sure they become educated? If so, what kinds of sacrifices do they make?
4. Think about the people in the story who helped Henry learn, and those who made it harder for him to learn. Are there ways that you help others to learn? What are they? Are there ways that you might be holding others back?

Other Writing Activities

You may wish to have students participate in one or more of the following writing activities. Set aside time for students to share and discuss their work.

1. Have students research a country in the world where education is not a right. Have students write a letter to the head of education in that country, or a part of the country, explaining why it is important to make education accessible to all children.
2. Ask students to create an award for Miss Hattie or Henry. Then have students write an acceptance speech for the character who receives the award.
3. Have students write a book recommendation for this story explaining why they would or would not recommend this book to other students.

ELL Teaching Activities

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners or who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. After the first reading of the story, go back through the illustrations and have students summarize what happened on each page, first orally, then in writing.
2. Teach ELL students simple phrases such as "I don't know that word." "I have a question." "Speak more slowly." "Please repeat that sentence." Encourage ELL students to use these phrases to communicate their needs while reading.
3. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then have students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
4. Have students give a short talk about what they admire about Henry's determination to learn to read and write.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas.

Social Studies

1. Have students use a world map or globe to locate continents, countries, or states mentioned in the story, depending on their grade level and familiarity with maps or globes. In particular, focus on Africa and North America, and the distance between the two continents. Have student speculate on how Africans got to the United States.
2. Have students research African American authors and others who spoke out in favor of education and other rights for African Americans from pre-Civil War times to the present day. Have students create presentations of their findings.
3. Let interested students research the institution of slavery in the United States, looking at why most southerners favored slavery and why most Northerners did not. Students may present their findings in a comparison chart or pro-and-con list.

Science

Have students study the cycle of sycamore trees (or other trees popular in your area) during the four seasons. Students may wish to draw trees during each season, and upper level students may want to talk about the effects that changes in temperature and amount of sunlight have on the trees being studied.

Music

Introduce students to the music that was created and sung by enslaved people during slavery time in the United States. Interested students may want to analyze the lyrics of a song and discuss their purpose or meanings. There is a great deal of information available on the Web about slave music. One such site is http://www.pbs.org/jazz/time/time_slavery.htm.

Art

Have students create “carvings” in play dough or clay to simulate Henry carving letters and words in his sycamore tree.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcia Vaughan is the author of numerous children's and young adult books. A full-time author, Vaughan is also a popular speaker at national and regional conferences. She did not become an author until she was in her thirties, when she realized that skills she had acquired as a librarian would serve her as an author. Vaughan has also written LEE & LOW's *The Secret to Freedom* and the forthcoming *Irena's Jars of Secrets* (2011). She and her family live in Vashon Island, Washington.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Derek Blanks received his B.F.A. degree from the Maryland Institute, College of Art in Baltimore. A native of Mississippi, Blanks now lives in Atlanta with his wife, where he is an artist, illustrator, designer, and photographer. *Up The Learning Tree* was his first picture book.

Awards and honors *Up The Learning Tree* has received include:

- Best Children's Books of the Year, Bank Street College
- Best Picture Book Honor, Society of School Librarians International
- Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Award, Honorable Mention
- Storytelling World Award, *Storytelling World* magazine
- South Carolina Children's Book Award Nominee

Resources on the Web

Learn more about *Up the Learning Tree* at:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/122/pb/up_the_learning_tree

Book Information

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Order Information

On the Web:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/ordering.mhtml> (general order information)

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/122/pb/up_the_learning_tree

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