

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

Written by Ellen Levine

Illustrated by Kadir Nelson

Introduce yourself and tell the group your reaction to the story.

The Caldecott Medal is awarded annually by the American Library Association to the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children. *Henry's Freedom Box* did not win first place, but was a Caldecott Honor book in 2008. The artist, Kadir Nelson, has twice been a Caldecott honor recipient and won the Caldecott Medal in 2020.

Read the story with your group. Pay attention to both the story and the illustrations.

Why wasn't Henry allowed to know his birthday?

What words would you use to describe Henry?

Oil of vitriol was an old name for concentrated sulfuric acid. Today we use the word vitriol to mean harsh and angry words. EX: His speech was full of political vitriol. Why did Henry put vitriol on his sore finger?

What do birds represent in the story?

What do leaves represent?

What is your opinion of the illustrations? Do you have a favorite? This picture was published in 1850.



The resurrection of Henry Box Brown at Philadelphia, who escaped from Richmond Va. in a box 3 feet long 2 1/2 ft. deep and 2 ft wide.

The Underground Railroad: a secret system, used in the 19th century, by which slaves in the southern U.S were helped to escape to places where there was no slavery.

The Underground Railroad wasn't really a railroad. It was a name given to the way that people escaped. No one is sure where it originally got its name, but the "underground" part of the name comes from its secrecy and the "railroad" part of the name comes from the way it was used to transport people.

The Underground Railroad used railroad terms in its organization. People who led slaves along the route were called conductors. Hideouts and homes where slaves hid along the way were called stations or depots. The slaves being helped to escape were called passengers or baggage.

Using these words was a kind of secret code to pass information in a way that others would not understand. Songs sung by slaves and those helping slaves to escape also contained hidden messages. Some people believe that safe routes of escape were sewn into quilt patterns.

This website lists some secret codes used by the people who were part of the Underground Railroad. <http://www.harriet-tubman.org/underground-railroad-secret-codes/>

Read the Author's Note at the back of the book.

Have you read or heard other stories about the Underground Railroad?

Does this story from American history remind you of other stories?

Pronunciation Practice

We have been practicing the OU sound, as in the word cow. This sound is always represented by the letter O followed by U, W, or UGH. You can practice by reading this poem:

The Hungry Owl

Anonymous

The **owl** looked **down** with his great **round** eyes
At the lowering **cloud** and the darkening skies.

"A good night for **scouting**," says he,

"A **mouse** or two may be **found** on the **ground**

Or a fat little bird in a tree."

So **down** he flew from the old church **tower**,

The **mouse** and birdie **crouch** and **cower**,

Back he flies in an **hour**,

"A very good supper," says he.

