

**ALMOST TO FREEDOM
BY VAUNDA MICHEAUX NELSON**

**Louisiana Young Readers' Choice Award Nominee 2006
Grades 3-5**

Submitted by Pabby Arnold, Children's Coordinator
East Baton Rouge Parish Library, Baton Rouge

Title: Almost to Freedom
Author: Vaunda Micheaux Nelson
Illustrator: Colin Bootman
Publisher: Carolrhoda Books, 2003
Pages: 40

Summary

Almost to Freedom is the story of a young girl's dramatic escape from slavery via the Underground Railroad told from the perspective of her beloved rag doll, Sally. Lindy's mother makes Sally from rags and gives it to her as a gift. Lindy and Sally become best friends and it is through Sally's "eyes" that we see a picture of the extremes of slave life: the cruelty and the love. Lindy receives a beating when she is caught writing words in the sand. Lindy's mother manages to escape with Lindy and Sally, and they meet up with Lindy's father, who had been sold "down the river." Lindy shares with her doll Sally all the scariness about running to Freedom on the Underground Railroad. Finally in a safe house, the family rests. But when they must flee in the middle of the night, the beloved rag doll is accidentally left behind. Sally worries about her friend and is sad until another little girl on the Underground Railroad discovers her and re-names Sally, Belinda.

Awards

2004 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award Honor Book
Independent Publisher Book Awards (IPPYs) Nominee 2004
PEN Center USA West Literary Awards Nominee 2004

Author's Biography

Vaunda Nelson, is a working librarian – a senior librarian in Children's Services at a public library in New Mexico. She began her life in Pennsylvania where she was born into a family of readers. Vaunda's mother found her name in a novel she was reading the day Vaunda was born. Her mother read to Vaunda and her sisters every day and her father wrote poetry. When she grew up she worked as a news reporter and a teacher before becoming a librarian. Having served twice on the Newbery committee for ALA, Vaunda has been able to study what makes

a book a prizewinner. Her very first book, *Always Gramma*, was selected by the Children's Book Council as a Notable Children's Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies – not a bad beginning! Since then her books have won the Georgia Children's Book Award (*Mayfield Crossing*), 1999 Parents Choice Gold Award (*Beyond Mayfield*), and a Coretta Scott King Honor for Illustration in 2004 for *Almost to Freedom*. As Vaunda explains in an author's note, she was inspired to write this story by a folk art museum's exhibit of black rag dolls, a few of which were discovered in Underground Railroad hideouts. Vaunda lives with her husband Drew and two cats.

Other Titles by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson

Beyond Mayfield
Mayfield's Crossing
Possibles
Ready? Set, Raymond!

Illustrator's Biography

Colin Bootman lived his first seven years in Trinidad before moving with his family to the United States. He turned to art as a way of coping with adjustment to a new culture and cites discovering comic books as a life-altering event. He studied art through high school and on into college where he was encouraged to try children's book illustrations as a way to work with various media. His first book *Young Frederick Douglas* was published in 1994. Since then he has illustrated a number of children's books, book covers, periodicals, and textbooks. Colin also teaches art in various after school programs. He cites the oral and visual influences of his early life in Trinidad as the greatest influence on his work.

Other Titles Illustrated by Colin Bootman

Don't Say Ain't by Irene Smalls-Hector
Follow the Leader by Vicki Winslow
In My Momma's Kitchen by Jerdine Nolen
Martin Luther King, Jr. by David A. Alder
The Music in Derrick's Heart by Gwendolyn Battle-Lavert
Papa's Mark by Gwendolyn Battle-Lavert
A Picture Book of Harriet Beecher Stowe by David A. Alder

Picture Books About Slavery

Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky by Faith Ringgold. When her little brother boards the train in the sky, Cassie must rely on her wits, the North Star and Harriet Tubman to guide her to Canada.

Follow the Drinking Gourd by Jeanette Winter. A picture-book version of the

famous African-American song that also explains about the Underground Railroad.

Freedom's Wings: Corey's Diary by Sharon Dennis Wyeth. Book One in a series. A nine-year-old slave keeps a diary of his journey to freedom along the Underground Railroad in 1857.

Meet Addy: An American Girl, Book One by Connie Porter. In 1864, after her father and brother are sold to another owner, nine-year-old Addy and her mother escape to Philadelphia.

Rachel Field's Hitty: Her First Hundred Years adapted by Rosemary Wells. Illustrated by Susan Jeffers. A doll named Hitty recounts her adventures as she moves through a continually changing string of owners.

Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt by Deborah Hopkinson. Illustrated by James Ransome. A young slave stitches a quilt with a map pattern, which guides her to freedom in the North.

Read-Alouds (more picture books)

Barefoot: An Escape on the Underground Railroad by Pamela Duncan Edwards

A Bus of Our Own by Freddi Williams Sanders

Goin' Some Place Special by Patricia C. McKissack

Jewels by Belinda Rochelle

Minty: A Story of Young Harriet Tubman by Alan Schroeder

A Place Called Freedom by Scott Russell Sanders

The Secret to Freedom by Marcia Vaughan

Up the Learning Tree by Marcia Vaughan (LYRC 2006)

Juvenile Biography

Dear Benjamin Banneker by Andrea Davis Pinkney

A Picture Book of Frederick Douglass by David Adler

A Picture Book of Harriet Tubman by David Adler

A Picture Book of Rosa Parks by David Adler

A Picture Book of Sojourner Truth by David Adler

Talkin' About Bessie by Nikki Grimes

Juvenile Non-Fiction

Freedom River by Doreen Rappaport

Allen Jay and the Underground Railroad by Marlene Targ Brill

Slaves to Soldiers, African-American Fighting Men in the Civil War by Wallace B. Black

The Underground Railroad by Raymond Bial.

Welcome to Addy's World (American Girls) American Girls Collections

Web Sites

Scholastic Lesson Plans: Steps to Freedom

http://teacher.scholastic.com/lessonplans/bookfairs/currconnection/almost_freedom.htm

Classroom activities related to *Almost to Freedom*. Includes discussion questions about the book and the Underground Railroad, related activities associated with the themes of the book, and an activity sheet to accompany the book.

National Geographic – The Underground Railroad

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/features/99/railroad/>

A virtual tour of the Underground Railroad. Includes links to classroom ideas, sites for kid activities, map of the route, and important people involved in the Underground Railroad.

Underground Railroad

<http://education.ucdavis.edu/NEW/STC/lesson/socstud/railroad/contents.htm>

Educational Guide to the Underground Railroad: includes information on major people involved in the Underground Railroad, personal narratives, literature, music, maps of escape routes and links to other related sites. No longer maintained, but has lots of information.

Aboard the Underground Railroad: A National Register Travel Itinerary

www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground

Descriptions of the houses connected with the Underground Railroad.

Africans in America – Judgment Day

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/index.html>

Includes narratives, historic documents, and comments by modern historians on African American history.

Addy's Escape to Freedom

<http://www.americangirl.com/agcn/addy/escape/index.html>

This is an interactive story based on the American Girl book *Meet Addy*. Students will enjoy it.

Carol Hurst's Children's Literature Site

www.carolhurst.com/subjects/slavery.html

"Slavery in the United States." This site includes excellent classroom activities, literary activities, booklists and web links.

Make a Rag Doll Like Sally

Supplies

- Soft unbleached cotton fabric - 24 inches square
- A golf ball sized piece of cotton stuffing or Polyester Fiberfill
- Strong yarn

Directions

Form the cotton stuffing into a nice round ball and wrap the fabric smoothly around it.

- Make sure the 4 points are equally hanging down.
- Make a knot in the two opposite points as hands.
- Don't make the arms too long!
- Optional: with a pencil you can (lightly) make the eyes and mouth (just two dots and one stripe).
- When playing with the doll, provide the child with some extra rags so she can use these in her play.