

**Classroom Guide for  
FREDERICK DOUGLASS:  
THE LAST DAY OF SLAVERY**  
by William Miller  
illustrated by Cedric Lucas

### Reading Level

Interest Level: Grades 2-5

Reading Level: Grade 3

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.2/.5

Lexile Measure®: 760 AD

Scholastic Reading Counts!™: 4.1

### Themes:

Courage, Injustice, Slavery, Freedom, African American History

### Synopsis

This picture book biography focuses on the childhood of Frederick Douglass leading up to a pivotal event in which he defends himself against a white slave breaker—a man whose job it was to break the spirit of any man or woman who might cause trouble or try to escape. The strength and courage which led Douglass to flee to the North and eventually become a leading abolitionist are evident in this defining act. Readers get a sense of the formative years of Douglass as he rebels against the slavery into which he was born. Separated from his mother as a boy, Douglass was keenly aware of the suffering of all slaves as he too faced numerous acts of cruelty. The book ends on a positive note in which Douglass promises that all slaves would one day be free.

### Background

Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey was born into slavery in Maryland in 1817 or 1818. Unlike most slaves, he was taught how to read by the wife of one of his masters. In 1838, he escaped to the North where he changed his last name to Douglass. There he began reading an anti-slavery newspaper, the LIBERATOR, edited by William Lloyd Garrison. Douglass, too, began speaking out about the sorrows of slavery and in 1845 wrote an autobiography, THE NARRATIVE OF THE

LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS, AN AMERICAN SLAVE. He also began publishing his own anti-slavery newspaper, THE NORTH STAR, in Rochester, New York. His home became a stop on the underground railroad as more escaped slaves made their way north. During the Civil War (1861–1865), Douglass helped sign up soldiers for the first black unit in the Union Army. He met with President Abraham Lincoln several times. Before his death in 1895, Douglass held several government jobs and published two more expanded versions of his life.

**Teacher Tip**

You may want to use FREDERICK DOUGLASS: THE LAST DAY OF SLAVERY as part of your observance of Martin Luther King Jr. Day (the third Monday in January) and during February, which is Black History Month.

**BEFORE READING****Prereading Focus Questions**

Before introducing the book, you may wish to have students discuss one or more of the following questions as a motivation for reading.

1. How do you expect to be treated by others? How do you feel if people don't treat you well?
2. Why is it hard to stand up to someone more powerful than you?
3. How would you define injustice? What are some examples of injustice that you know about?
4. Do you think everyone should learn how to read? Do you ever think of knowing how to read as a privilege or a right? Why might some people want to control who learns to read?

**Exploring the Book**

Display the book and read aloud the title. If students are unfamiliar with Frederick Douglass, share information from the Background section of this guide or have them do some preliminary research on their own.

Encourage students to speculate on the relationship between Frederick Douglass and the last day of slavery.

Discuss the cover illustration and have students talk about how the picture might relate to the title of the book.

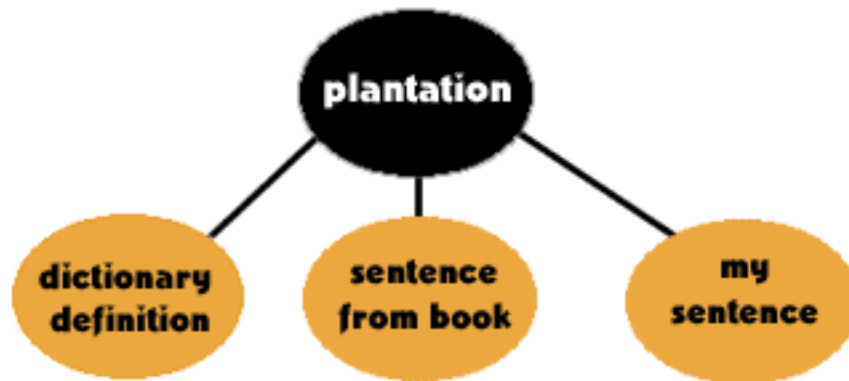
**Setting a Purpose for Reading**

Ask students to predict some things they might learn from this book about Frederick Douglass.

Explain to students that this book has won many children's literature awards. As they read the book, tell students to think about why the book has been honored.

**Vocabulary**

Have students write down unfamiliar words from the story. Some words that may be unfamiliar are: **plantation, overseer, groom, wounds, disbelief**. Students can work with partners to complete webs like the one shown here. Post the webs so that others in the class have access to them.

**READING AND RESPONDING****Discussion Questions**

Here are some questions to use to help students review the book and comprehend the text. Encourage students to refer to places in the book and illustrations to support their answers.

1. What did it mean to be a slave in Frederick Douglass' time?
2. As a boy, what did Frederick notice about the slaves around him?
3. When an old man is punished, "Frederick felt the blows on his back, on the back of all the slaves who stood beside him." What does the author mean by this?
4. What was Covey's job? Why would a plantation owner hire someone like him?
5. Why didn't Covey like it when he saw Frederick reading?
6. What made Frederick run away from the plantation?
7. Why did Sandy give Frederick a magic root? Why do you think slaves believed in magic spells and charms?
8. For Douglass, what was the last day of slavery? What made him defend himself against Covey? How was his behavior different from that of other slaves?
9. What promise did Frederick make to his mother? What do you think gave him the determination to make this promise?
10. This book only tells about the early years of Frederick Douglass. What predictions would you make about his later life?

### Literature Circles\*

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in developing the roles of the circle members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to those in the Discussion Question section of this guide to help group members explore the text.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for lines that tell what Frederick Douglass is thinking.
- The **Illustrator** might draw pictures to show what Frederick dreams about.
- The **Connector** might find more information about the life of enslaved people on a plantation during the early 1800s.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the text or pages that the group is discussing.
- The **Investigator** might find other books about Frederick Douglass.

\*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Two such books you may wish to refer to are: *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 1994) 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 think about the life of Frederick Douglass. Students might respond in reader's journals, oral discussion, or drawings.

1. What made Frederick Douglass different? (Note: "different" may be interpreted in a number of ways. Encourage students to think beyond the literal and obvious differences.)
2. When do you think Douglass first stopped "acting like a slave"?
3. How do the illustrations in this book add to your understanding of what happens?
4. After Frederick ran away from Covey, "he wished he were an animal: a creature with furs and claws to protect himself. . . . a bird, able to soar over the treetops . . ." What animal would you want to be if you were in trouble? Why?
5. What would you tell a friend about Frederick Douglass? Why are the things you decide to tell important?

### Other Writing Activities

You may wish to have students participate in one or more of the following writing activities.

1. Think about an injustice that you feel is taking place today. Write a letter to the editor of a newspaper telling what you think is wrong and offering your ideas for improving the situation.

2. Write a poem about Frederick Douglass. (Visit [www.leeandlow.com/teachers/poetry.html](http://www.leeandlow.com/teachers/poetry.html) for tips on helping students get started writing their own poems.)
3. Make a timeline of events in the childhood of Frederick Douglass. Explain how each event helped make him strong.
4. Frederick Douglass liked to read. What are some books you think he might have enjoyed? Why?
5. What do you think Frederick Douglass would say or do about some of the problems in today's society? Why?

### **ESL Teaching Strategies**

The following activities may be used with students who speak English as a second language.

1. Read aloud a sentence and have students repeat the sentence after you, pointing to each word as they speak.
2. Make a tape recording of the story for students to listen to as they follow along in the book.
3. Ask English speakers to act out parts of the book as you read them aloud.

### **INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES**

To help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas, introduce some of the following activities.

#### **Social Studies**

1. Assign students to find out more about the life of Frederick Douglass. Point out that he escaped to the North while there was still slavery in the South, but he lived to see slavery abolished throughout the United States. Suggest that students search online or browse through encyclopedias and other juvenile biographies.
2. Have students locate places associated with Douglass on a U.S. map. These might include Baltimore, Maryland; New York City; New Bedford, Massachusetts; England; Rochester, New York; Washington, D.C.
3. Ask students to do research on southern plantation life before the Civil War. Then have them make a diagram or drawing to show the different buildings located on a plantation and add captions or notes explaining the function of each building. Students might look on the Internet and in social studies textbooks, encyclopedias, or issues of magazines such as COBBLESTONE for the information they need.

### Science

Remind students that Frederick Douglass worked in the cotton and corn fields on the plantation. Investigate one of these crops. Begin by showing a photograph of the plant. Ask students to tell what they know about the plant. Develop a series of questions to investigate such as: How does the plant grow? In what kinds of climates does it grow best? What is the plant used for? Have students use nonfiction books, science books, and encyclopedias to learn more. Students might also find information on the Internet.

### Art

Draw attention to the artist's use of color in the illustrations. What color does the artist use to show the woods? To show the field at dawn? How do these colors make you feel? Encourage students to draw their own pictures of a scene from Frederick Douglass' life and to choose their colors to convey a mood or feeling. Set aside time for students to share and discuss their work with the class.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**William Miller** is the author of numerous books for young people including *ZORA HURSTON AND THE CHINABERRY TREE*, a Reading Rainbow selection; *RICHARD WRIGHT AND THE LIBRARY CARD*, a SMITHSONIAN magazine Notable Children's Book; *NIGHT GOLF*, a Parents' Choice Award Gold Medal winner; *THE PIANO*, a "Teacher's Choices" selection; and *RENT PARTY JAZZ*, a Bank Street College "Best Book of the Year" and *THE BUS RIDE. FREDERICK DOUGLASS: THE LAST DAY OF SLAVERY* received the Paterson Poetry Prize and was also chosen as a Notable Children's Book by SMITHSONIAN magazine. Of his books on Hurston, Douglass, and Wright, Miller says "These books explore the early lives of three major African American authors. My purpose is to inspire young readers and encourage them to know more about Hurston, Douglass, and Wright."

Miller was raised in Anniston, Alabama, and now lives in York, Pennsylvania, where he teaches creative writing and African American literature at York College.

### ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Cedric Lucas** is a native New Yorker who teaches art to middle school students in the Bronx. Lucas received his bachelor's degree in fine arts from the School of Visual Arts and his masters from Lehman College.

*FREDERICK DOUGLASS: THE LAST DAY OF SLAVERY* was Lucas' first picture book. To make the illustrations authentic, he did a lot of research at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City. "It [was] particularly challenging because there were really no photos of Douglass as a young man," he says. PUBLISHERS WEEKLY noted that Lucas' "illustrations reinforce the sense of Douglas's remarkable endurance, determination and humanity."

Since *FREDERICK DOUGLASS* was published, Lucas has illustrated several other books for children including *NIGHT GOLF*, also by William Miller. Lucas and his family live in Yonkers, New York.

**Resources on the Web**

For the latest reviews and awards related to **FREDERICK DOUGLASS: THE LAST DAY OF SLAVERY** visit: <http://www.leeandlow.com/books/slave.html>

**Other Books by William Miller****ZORA HURSTON AND THE CHINABERRY TREE:**

<http://www.leeandlow.com/books/zora.html>

**RICHARD WRIGHT AND THE LIBRARY CARD:**

<http://www.leeandlow.com/books/wright.html>

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**JOE LOUIS, MY CHAMPION**

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**Other Books Illustrated by Cedric Lucas****NIGHT GOLF:**

<http://www.leeandlow.com/books/golf.html>

**BookTalk with William Miller**

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**Book Information**

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